

**BRITISH GOVERNMENT WAR AIMS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS A
NEGOTIATED PEACE, SEPTEMBER 1939 TO JULY 1940**

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The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the development of the British Government's war aims and the framework it provided for reaction to the numerous peace feelers which were received. It will be suggested that the overriding objective was to create a secure and lasting peace; one which was guaranteed by more than German signatures.

The war which was fought up to May 1940 was a limited one. This was dictated as much by shortage of trained men, equipment and finance as by the war aims adopted. War aims were restricted to the search for a guaranteed peace, and therefore the question of terms and the safeguards considered essential were of central importance. In this, the future of Hitler was more significant than matters relating to the territorial, military and diplomatic criteria for peace.

The war was expected to be ended by negotiations with a German Government which had abandoned aggression as an instrument of policy. However, Chamberlain and his colleagues had to decide how to deal with proposals for peace made after Germany's defeat of Poland. There was a series of such enquiries or proposals, made by either neutrals or Germany, starting on 19 September. It was, however, Hitler's offer of 6 October which formed the foundation for consideration of later proposals.

Finally, the thesis will concentrate on the effects of the defeat in France on the policies and attitudes previously discussed. This defeat raised the immediate prospect of needing to sue for peace, but despite hesitation and division, the War Cabinet agreed to postpone any long-term decision until it had been proved whether or not Britain could survive the summer. Hitler's peace offer in July 1940 shows how attitudes had changed since his approach the previous October.

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Introduction

The period covered by this thesis already has a wide and extensive historiography and the author's purpose is not to provide one more run through the events of 1939 and 1940 but to look in detail at two closely defined themes; namely the Government's war aims and its approach to the issue of a negotiated peace settlement.

The background to the period was provided initially by books such as Winston Churchill's The Second World War (1949) and the Official History series, edited by J.R.M. Butler (1957). From this base a number of studies have looked at particular aspects of the period. This process has been accelerated since the official papers of the period were opened to the public, and helped by most of the major figures either committing their thoughts about the period to print, or being the subject of biographies. Certain collections of recently accessible private papers have been exploited to shed new light on themes mentioned above, in particular those of Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax.

Of the many studies of particular aspects of the period in question, there are a few which have served to open up new areas of thought which this thesis hopes to build upon, or in some instances challenge. Maurice Cowling in The Impact of Hitler. British Politics and British Policy 1933 - 1940 (1975) was the first to consider some of the political choices made by the Chamberlain Government, both before the outbreak of war and once it had begun. Harold Deutsch's The Conspiracy against Hitler in the Twilight War (1968) and Peter Ludlow's essay "The Unwinding of Appeasement" in Das "Andere Deutschland" im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1977), edited by Lothar Kettenacker have provided respectively insights into the covert activity within Germany to which the British Government felt obliged to respond, and something of the background against which those reactions were worked out.

Paul Addison's contribution to Lloyd George: Twelve Essays (1971), edited by A.J.P. Taylor was one of the first to document the persistence of appeasement attitudes through the Phoney War months and to reveal the divided opinions within the Cabinet as late as the last week of May 1940. Addison also speculated that Churchill, although personally resolute, may have envisaged Lloyd George as a possible successor who could negotiate with Hitler had the worst come to the worst.

Of the recent studies of events after the commencement of the attack on the Western Front in May 1940, that of Philip Bell, A Certain Eventuality : Britain and the Fall of France (1974), provides the essential framework for the crucial Cabinet discussions of late May and early June. David Reynolds in The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-1941 (1981), seeks to go beyond this to the reasons why Churchill decided to fight on despite the French collapse. In addition, Martin Gilbert's Finest Hour (1983), Volume VI of the Winston Churchill biography, covering 1939-1941, has enabled extensive reference to Churchill's papers to be made.

In the above historiography several questions were not fully resolved. As regards the period before May 1940 these questions related to the decision process and definition of Britain's detailed war aims and whether or not they could be achieved by negotiation with Germany. For the period after May 1940 they centre on the agreement to continue the war. Although this policy was adopted unanimously, both the objectives agreed upon and the major factors influencing and conditioning this decision had not been fully explored.

It is of course true that as far as those in the British Government were concerned, the war's broad purpose was to defend Britain's interests and her position in the world. In this regard it had similarities to

the objectives of earlier wars. However, this thesis looks at the practicalities of this broad theme on the European stage, and in particular the adjustments in relationship with Germany that were deemed necessary.

In retrospect it is easy to believe that the British Government saw that "total war" was necessary from the outset and that no accommodation with Hitler could have been possible, but in fact this was not the case. Indeed, so long as Chamberlain remained Prime Minister there was always the possibility that war could be ended by negotiations - provided British honour was not compromised.

Throughout the period in question there were many opportunities for peace discussions to be started and the Government had to respond to each according to its estimation of whether or not it would bring progress towards Britain's objectives. This posed an initial difficulty as in order to make such a judgement, there had to be a definition of the precise objectives desired.

With Churchill's advent as Prime Minister the character and atmosphere of the War Cabinet changed. This was partly due to the vigorous and resolute nature of the new Prime Minister, a man who had long studied warfare and found waging it exhilarating. Yet the altered atmosphere was also due to the German attack on France and the Low Countries opening a new and more deadly phase of hostilities.

As the war turned against the Allies in May 1940 and Britain had to decide whether to stand alone, a new set of imperatives made discussion of war aims immediate and vital. In this situation, the reasons why Churchill's Government decided it did not need to sue for peace are most important. As a consequence of military collapse, war aims became tied

for the first time to specific military developments. If these developments went badly, particularly if the RAF was unable to contain the Luftwaffe, then as a direct consequence there would be a significant narrowing of their objectives, as peace - almost any peace - could overtake all other considerations. It is important that this linkage is established as it then explains how the Cabinet came to decide upon the "wait and see" policy which was pursued from late May 1940 throughout the rest of the summer.

CHAPTER 1

WAR AIMS IN THE FIRST MONTH

In a speech to the House of Commons on 24th August 1939, Neville Chamberlain outlined what he saw as the long-standing bases of British Foreign policy. "The first basis", he said, "is our determination to resist methods of force. The second basis is our recognition of the world desire to pursue the constructive work of building peace ..."¹ A year previously the second of these bases had proved decisive, as the Government yielded to the threat of force over the Sudeten crisis. In the late summer of 1939 Britain had again to decide which of the above pillars of policy should be pre-eminent. That is, whether the interests of long-term peace would best be served by resistance or appeasement.² This was no easy decision to make, and it was far from the foregone conclusion suggested by such as Correlli Barnett when he writes, "For throughout the Polish crisis there had been no doubt whatsoever in Chamberlain's mind or in the mind of the Cabinet, or in the mind of Parliament and public that there was only one course of action England could follow if Germany should attack Poland: the course dictated by moral obligation".³ There was indeed much doubt. Harold Macmillan wrote that his greatest fear was another peace resulting from further surrender, and Lieutenant-General Pownall concurred with this, noting on 29 August, "My chief anxiety is lest

¹ Hansard, 24th Aug., Vol. 351, Cols. 9-10. All references in this chapter are to 1939 unless otherwise stated.

² Ibid; He continued to say that if war occurred "we shall not be fighting for the political future of a far away city in a foreign land, we shall be fighting for the preservation of those principles of which I have spoken." Lord Hankey compares this with Asquith's statement on 6th August 1914, that "... we are fighting to vindicate the principle that small nationalities are not to be crushed, in defiance of international good faith, by the arbitrary will of a strong and overmastering power." Memorandum, "War Policy" 12th Sept. Hankey Papers, Churchill College Cambridge. HNKY 11/1.

³ Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1972. p.535. Subsequently; Barnett. See also Sidney Aster, *The Making of the Second World War*. London; History Book Club, 1973. Subsequently; Aster.

H.M.G. give way to Hitler!"¹ The reasons for this anxiety were numerous and even after war had been declared many of them persisted. Consequently they provide an important background to the development of the Government's war aims over the ensuing months.

The most obvious inhibition to starting a war was the Government's and especially the Prime Minister's desire to maintain peace, previously manifested in their policy of appeasing aggressors. On 1 and 2 September, with the German forces advancing through Poland, Chamberlain "spared no effort whatever to keep the peace",² because even at this late stage he still believed "War wins nothing, cures nothing, ends nothing", lamenting to Parliament that no-one "could have done more to try to keep open the way for an honourable and equitable settlement."³

The second reason for any non-fulfilment of the Guarantee to Poland was a legitimate questioning as to whether war was in Britain's best interests. The United States' Ambassador, Joseph Kennedy, recorded Chamberlain's comment on 23 August that "the futility of it all is the thing that is so frightful; after all they cannot save the Poles; they can merely carry on a war of revenge that will mean the destruction of the whole of Europe."⁴ A third factor may be found in the uncertainty as to the attitude of France. With such obstacles to war it is hardly surprising that as late as 2 September Lord Beaverbrook wrote, "I hope we are going to escape a European War",⁵ or that the previous day Chamberlain had found himself able to tell Parliament that some elements of military preparation had not been completed because, since they "can be put into force rapidly", they "can be deferred until war seems inevitable."⁶ Leo Amery MP certainly felt a deep concern lest the

¹ Harold Macmillan, *The Blast of War*. London; Macmillan, 1967. Preface; *Diary of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall*. 29th August. Pownall 1939, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London. Subsequently; Pownall Diary.

² From Lord Linlithgow, India Office Library, Mss Eur D 609/18, 5th Sept.

³ Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol.351, Col.127.

⁴ Sidney Aster, p.334-5.

⁵ In A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*. London:Hamish Hamilton, 1972.p.395.

⁶ Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol.351, Col.131.

obstacles to war - psychological, strategic and uncertainty about France - may prove insuperable, writing on 2 September that "Once again, I fear two lots of funks have frightened each other", and on the following day of a renewed "impression" of a last moment attempt at "appeasement".¹ Yet despite hesitation and misgiving, within a fortnight of bemoaning the "futility of it all" and two days after not feeling that it was yet "inevitable", the Prime Minister led Britain into war with Germany.

The reasons for the declaration of war are signposts to attitudes which persisted for at least the rest of the Phoney War, and it is hard to escape the impression that they centred on the belief that although the obstacles to the commencement of hostilities were great, those to the preservation of peace were greater.

On the evening of the German attack on Poland the Prime Minister read out to Parliament the text of the "document"² warning the German Government that they had "created conditions ... which call for the implementation by the Governments of the United Kingdom and of France of the undertaking to Poland to come to her assistance". War would result, he said, unless "satisfactory" assurances were given by the Germans that they had "suspended all aggressive action against Poland" and were "prepared promptly to withdraw their forces ..."³ These phrases contained the essence of the reason for Britain declaring war as regards both underlying causes and the specific occasion of the conflict. The question of war had been raised by Germany's "aggressive action " over the previous years, and the possibility of any solution to this question short of war had been removed by the lack of any "satisfactory assurances of peace". Although some kind of negotiated arrangement to settle the Danzig question would even then have been acceptable, Chamberlain insisted that "I should have to be convinced of

¹*Amery Diary 2nd & 3rd Sept. Hugh Dalton thought "Parliament had to hound" the Government to declare war. Diary 11th Sept. Part 1/21.*

²*Not yet an ultimatum.*

³*Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol. 751, Col. 130.*

the good faith of the other side" before this could be considered. In other words, "we are driven by the fact that we cannot trust the word of the leaders of the German people or the sincerity of their declarations, to enter into a war".¹ This theme of Nazi unreliability making the resort to force necessary was a constant of the months after September 1939, but even at the late hour of the first of that month a way to purge this untrustworthiness was offered. If the status quo ante was restored then negotiations would become a possibility. In his speech to Parliament on 2 September the Prime Minister announced that if "German forces are withdrawn from Polish territory" war would be averted. Not only this, but such a withdrawal would mean that the position would be considered by Britain as "being the same as it was before the German forces crossed the Polish frontier". Thus "the way would be open to discussion between the German and Polish Governments on the matters at issue between them ...".² A withdrawal of German troops would therefore be the evidence of "the good faith of the other side", which Chamberlain desired as a prerequisite to any conference. It can be concluded that the final factor which made war inevitable was not of itself the invasion of Poland - had it been then the well-known attempts by Mussolini and others to arrange a Conference after 1 September would have been rejected out of hand. Rather that by refusing to withdraw their forces from Poland in return for a Conference,³ the Germans finally proved that they would not accept the peaceful settlement of disputes. Because of this, and with "determination to see it through to the end",⁴ war was declared.

¹ Linlithgow to Zetland, India Office Library Mss Eur D 609/18, 5th Sept. summarising Chamberlain's broadcast to Germany of 3rd Sept.

² Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol. 351, Col. 281. Also Zetland to Linlithgow, 4th Sept. India Office Library Mss Eur D 609/11. And Cadogan Diary 1st Sept. ACAD 1/8. Churchill College Cambridge.

³ See Chamberlain to his sisters on 10th Sept. for reference to "the final longdrawn-out agonies that preceded the actual declaration of war". NC 18/1/1116. Chamberlain Papers. Birmingham University.

⁴ Chamberlain, Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol. 351, Col. 131.

Robert Boothby, later Lord Boothby, but then a Conservative MP, has described Britain's position at the outbreak of war in a way that is justly well-known; "Thus we tumbled into Armageddon without heart, without songs, without an ally except France (and she luke-warm), without aircraft, without tanks, without guns, without rifles, without even a reserve of essential raw commodities and feeding stuffs."¹ Of Britain's weakness the summary is accurate, but it begins with the assumption that "Armageddon" had arrived. This was not an assumption made by the Government, nor did it follow from the reasons for declaring war that such was an assumption that they ought to have made. War had resulted not so much from a specific act of aggression as from a refusal to abandon aggression as an instrument of policy. Therefore, if Germany showed that this policy had now been dispensed with both generally and in the case of Poland, should Britain be willing to negotiate peace? This question, and the related one of how to prove the veracity of such a renunciation of force, was central to the Government's thinking on war aims and attitudes towards peace negotiations at least up to May 1940.

The object of this chapter is to describe and analyse the development of the Government's thinking about war aims during the first month of the war. By doing this the framework will be created for discussing the expectations of and reactions to possible peace feelers during this period, which will be the subject of the following chapter.

Once war had been declared the Government faced the question of formulating and announcing its war aims. This proved to be no easy matter and, in the end, no formal statement of aims was made. The difficulties presented arose from many quarters. Not only had aims to be announced but they had first to be formulated. Any statement made would need to be considered in the light of French, German, neutral (by

¹Robert Boothby, *I Fight to Live*. London: Gollancz, 1947. p.194.

which was usually meant United States), Dominion and domestic opinion. It must also not offer hostages to fortune and avoid Britain "getting committed to anything fixed in a fluid world, when no-one can say which way the tide will set".¹

As early as 9 September Chamberlain brought the attention of Cabinet to the issue of attempting "to define our war aims" with the idea of issuing a statement on them. The purpose of this being as ever to respond to an immediate problem, in this case to quash "uninformed rumours" that the fall of Poland might lead to the end of the war, but beyond "the essential preliminary" of "the destruction of Hitlerism" the Prime Minister was not prepared to go.² Therefore no authoritative statement was made, despite the wishes of the Foreign Secretary for a more long-term declaration.³ This should not be taken, however, to imply that aims were not formulated, as the difficulties related mainly to their enunciation.

War aims could of course be declared in "generalities",⁴ relating to future ideals and aspirations, but further than this all manner of problems arose. On the question of "the restoration of Poland", the occupation of which was the occasion of the war, the fact of the Russian advance in that country created what could have been insuperable barriers. Instead this obstacle was overcome by pronouncing it irrelevant in the interests of the greater cause of peace. "Are we to add the primary duty of turning her (Russia) out to that of turning Germany out?"⁵, Chamberlain asked rhetorically on 25 September. Moreover, although the evacuation of Poland, by the Germans at least, was a prerequisite to

¹R.A. Butler 23rd Sept. FO371/22946.

²Cab 65/1, WM (39) 9, 9th Sept.

³See Lord Robert Cecil's note of a talk with Halifax on 26th Sept. Cecil of Chelwood Papers. British Library. Add Mss 51084, Vol XIV.

⁴Halifax in FO800/325 28th Sept. H/XXXIX/7 & 8. Also Eden declaring himself in favour of "a United States of Europe" and disarmament. Harvey Diary, 6th Oct. British Library. Add Mss 56395.

⁵Letter to Lord Tweedsmuir 25th Sept. Also Cadogan Diary 23rd Sept. ACAD 1/8; and D. Koskoff, *Joseph P. Kennedy: a life and times*.

Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974. pp.213-214. Subsequently: Koskoff.

negotiations, that is not to say that the Government favoured the exact pre-1939 – or 1938 – status quo.¹ The overriding aim was to restore a lasting peace and, as will be shown, all else was subordinate to this. This was particularly true as regards national frontiers, so it should not be surprising that Chamberlain wanted nothing which "might have the effect of tying us down too rigidly and might prejudice an eventual settlement."² Even when it came to "the destruction of Hitlerism"³ there were difficulties. Was this to mean the removal of Hitler? Cadogan asked "What if Hitler hands over to Goering?",⁴ and if "Hitlerism" meant something else, then exactly what? It is the unfolding of such questions which forms much of the study in this thesis. Thus, due to "the practical difficulties of making any definite statement at this stage",⁵ generalities were resorted to, but even these, as Walter Monckton, Director General of the Ministry of Information warned, were open to different interpretations.

By the end of September the War Cabinet had decided that no "detailed war aims" should be formulated; instead policy and statements ought to follow a "general line". This was a passage from Chamberlain's 20 September speech; "Our general purpose ... is to redeem Europe from the perpetual and recurring fear of German aggression, and enable the peoples of Europe to preserve their liberties and their independence".⁶ Within this "general line" of policy there are three aspects which need to be analysed. Firstly, the question of whether Britain was fighting the German people or merely their Government. Secondly, exactly what

M. Balfour, Propaganda in War 1949-1945. London: Routledge and Kegan

¹ *Paul. 1981. p.168. Subsequently: Balfour.*

² *Cab 65/1, WM (39) 9, 9th Sept. Repeated on 25th Sept. to Lord Tweedsmuir, Chamberlain Papers. NC 7/11/32.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Cadogan Diary, 23rd Sept. ACAD 1/8.*

⁵ *FO 800/325 H/XXXIX/4 Rex Leeper on War Aims; Walter Monckton to Kurt Hahn, 4th Oct. Bodleian Library. Dep. Monckton Trustees 8.*

⁶ *Quoted in Hankey Papers, 29th Sept. [In fact he has transposed "independence" and "liberties"]. HNKY 11/2.*

the Chamberlain Government was trying to achieve by war.¹

Thirdly, whether peace would have been made under any circumstances with Hitler. These issues will be returned to frequently and were no mere theoretical concerns, as they considerably influenced the Government's conduct, although much of the reasoning behind the conclusions reached does seem to have become divorced from strategic reality and on occasion borders on the wishful.

As regards the distinction between Germany and her Government, on 1 September, Chamberlain told the House of Commons that "We have no quarrel with the German people, except that they allow themselves to be governed by a Nazi Government".² Four days later in a broadcast to these same "German people" he repeated the sentiment more graphically:

"In this war we are not fighting against you, the German people, for whom we have no bitter feelings, but against a tyrannous and forsworn regime, which has betrayed not only you, its own people, but the whole of Western civilization and all that you and we hold dear."³

Not only was this important distinction Government policy, it was that of the Labour party as well. On 15 September, Philip Noel-Baker MP sent Lord Robert Cecil a memorandum on the "Peace Aims of the Labour

¹ *This vagueness was expressed in the following limerick. See; The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1972 p.8.*

*"There was an old Gentleman with gout, [Chamberlain]
When asked what the war was about
Was heard to reply
"My colleagues and I,
Are doing our best to find out"."*

² *Hansard, 2nd Sept., Vol.351, Column 132.*

³ *FO 371/24362 Royal Institute of International Affairs memo on War and Peace Aims, 9th Jan. 1940. Taken from "The Times", 5th Sept.; also Eden broadcast to the Dominions on 11th Sept.; Hankey wrote to his wife on 3rd Sept., "We now have to see this business through, cost what it may, and down Hitler and his rascally crew and rescue the decent German people of whom there are many, from their gangsters". HNKY 3/43. Hankey Papers, Churchill College Cambridge.*

Party" which declared that "This is a war, not against the German people, but against the Nazi Government of Germany ..."¹

Despite the early unanimity of opinion that the German people were not primarily responsible for the war, and the Ministry of Information's decision to "make clear that hostility is not to people, but to its (Germany's) rulers and their policy", misgivings slowly developed.² These concerned a desire not to "frighten the French" over the clear divergence of allied policy on this matter.³ The practical expression of the distinction between German Government and population, which as Harold C. Deutsch has pointed out, lay partly in the perceived "utility of major Opposition groupings in Germany",⁴ partly in the inability of many to believe that any nation could actually want to repeat World War One, and also partly in the Government's failure to take account of the domestic popularity of Germany's military success, was to make German minds and not their armed forces or homes the primary objective of British attack. The issue of whether or not the German people were to be regarded as the enemy - and consequently attacked as such - was only of immediate importance later in the autumn. At the outbreak of war it was of more symbolic and psychological than strategic or diplomatic significance, because it held out the hope of a war short of the totalitarian nature that was feared. This was the one crucial assumption that rested upon the belief that the people of Germany did not want war. Because they were not behind the war, they did not need to be defeated in order for allied aims to

¹*Cecil of Chelwood Papers. Add Mss 51109. Misc. Corr. Vol. XXXIX. 15th Sept.*

²*Speech by Lord MacMillan 7th Sept. BBC(WAC) R 34/941.*

³*Prem 1/441. Chamberlain's note on MacMillan's "Principles Underlying British Wartime Propaganda", 22nd Dec.*

⁴*Harold C. Deutsch, The Conspiracy against Hitler in the Twilight War. London: Oxford University Press. 1968. p.104. Subsequently: Deutsch.*

be achieved, so a settlement short of Armageddon was a real possibility. Thus the overthrow of "Hitlerism" from within Germany - followed by a withdrawal from Poland - was seen by many in London as a possible acceptable, even highly desirable, way for hostilities to be terminated.¹ This is also a recurring theme of "Phoney War" thought.

Secondly, having thus established that the war was initially perceived as being against the Nazi Government of Germany rather than against the German people themselves, it must now be discovered exactly what the war was designed to achieve and what "victory" would mean in practice. Given the many declarations of "determination to see it

¹This will be examined in detail in the later discussion of peace negotiations. However, even in the Autumn of 1939 there were some misgivings about whether such a policy would result in sufficient of a victory. The sharpest - and the most amusing - examination of this is in the poem "No quarrel" by A.P. Herbert MP, a regular contributor to "Punch" magazine.

"No Quarrel"

1. "We have no quarrel with the German nation"
One would not quarrel with a cloud of sheep
But generation after generation
They cough up rulers who disturb our sleep.
2. "We have no quarrel with the German nation"
They're fond of music, poetry and beer
But all the same with tiresome iteration
They choose a fool to govern them - and cheer.
3. "We have no quarrel with the German nation"
But no-one else pollutes the common pot
They are the cause of every conflagration ...
Is it mere coincidence, or what?
4. "We have no quarrel with the German nation"
When Wilhelm was the madman of the chain
We helped along their rehabilitation ...
And now, by God, they do it all again. *
5. "We have no quarrel with the German nation"
And Wagner's works are very good indeed
But if they must repeat their abberation
It might be better if they did not breed.
6. "We have no quarrel with the German nation"
In their affairs, of course, we have no say
We mildly indicate that mass-castration
In our opinion is the only way.

through to the end" and of resolution "to fight this grim war to the end",¹ including Chamberlain's phrase when declaring war, "Now we have resolved to finish it",² the most important question to be asked of these statements is not to doubt the resolve expressed but to ascertain exactly to what end it was directed.

The first element of this determination was clearly to remove German troops from Poland. On 10 September, Lord Halifax reminded Robert Cecil that no "peace proposal" which involved "our acceptance of the subjugation of Poland and other nations recently overpowered by Germany" would be acceptable, nor would a complete occupation of Poland make any difference to this.³ The Foreign Secretary's aim was to counter the claim that there was no longer any reason for the war after Poland's defeat, an idea given greater emphasis by the Soviet occupation later in the month. The Soviet advance "made no difference to our intention to see Poland through", and comparisons were made between her fate and that of Belgium in 1914.⁴ Chamberlain said that he could "see nothing in what has happened that should lead this country to modify the attitude which it has felt right to take".⁵

Unlike Belgium in 1914, despite the desire to liberate Poland, there was no wish to "reconstitute" it exactly. With the Russian advance it was impossible to restore Poland's Eastern border, "without going to war with Russia, which we don't want to do".⁶ Moreover, on her Western border, and also over Czechoslovakia there were other problems. As noted earlier the Government was determined not to let

¹ Euan Wallace Diary, 3rd Sept. Bodleian Library, Mss Eng Hist c495.; *"Chips": The diaries of Sir Henry Channon*. Edited by Robert Rhodes James. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967. Subsequently; Channon. 24th Sept. p.221.

² BBC News Bulletins, 3rd Sept.

³ Halifax to Cecil, 11th Sept. Cecil of Chelwood Papers, Add Mss 51084.

⁴ A.V. Alexander. Interview with Churchill on 18th Sept. Alexander Papers, Churchill College Cambridge, AVAR 1-14.; Also Attlee, Hansard, 3rd Oct. Vol. 351, Col. 1862.

⁵ Hansard, 3rd Oct. Vol. 351, Col. 1855.

⁶ Cadogan Diary, 23rd Sept. Churchill College Cambridge, ACAD 1/8.

boundary lines stand in the way of a lasting peace, and the idea that Germany did have some justifiable claims against parts of Western Poland was still common. This would have been extremely difficult to state publicly, although it must have been clear that it was considerations of this nature that prevented the expression of anything other than vague war aims, for example the statement that "freedom for Czechoslovakia and for Poland in general terms, without defining the character or the future boundaries of these countries" ought to be the British position.¹ This was, Cadogan noted "no doubt sound", but did not really answer the problem of how to bring such objectives to fruition.

Britain was therefore fighting to make the Germans evacuate Poland, but just as the initial attack on the Poles had been not much more than the occasion of the war, so their freeing would mainly be the evidence of, rather than the reason for, peace. The Allies may have gone to war over Poland, yet it would be superficial to describe it as a war either for or about Poland; their reasons and objectives ran far deeper than that. Although there was a tendency to view the war as "a crusade", with "no purpose to serve, but the saving of liberty itself" and against "brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution",² Government statements, despite geographic imprecision, showed that they knew exactly what was desired from the resort to arms. The Prime Minister described this purpose as "to redeem Europe from the perpetual and recurring fear of German aggression and enable the peoples of Europe to preserve their independence and

¹FO 800/325 H/XXXIX/14 28th Sept. He also wrote that "The occupation of Austria was also an act of aggression which we may wish to see remedied after the war, but it may be wise to make no reference to Austria at present". Similar sentiments can be found in Linlithgow to Zetland, 18th Sept., India Office Library Mss Eur D 609/18.

²Lord MacMillan to BBC, 7th Sept., BBC(WAC) R34/941; *Daily Telegraph*, 4th Sept.; *The Times*, 4th Sept.

their liberties".¹ As noted earlier, Lord Hankey referred to this as the "general line" of policy. This, Chamberlain maintained was "not an abstraction, but something very real and concrete ..." ² and did not only relate to Poland, it was "to rid themselves once and for all of the perpetual threat of German aggression, of which Poland is only the latest instance".³ After removing this "threat" Britain wished to see a peace which was both "secure" and one "that will last".⁴ Indeed the Prime Minister dearly hoped that "in the long run what we are now doing may be a step towards a lasting peace".⁵

Thirdly, it is necessary to discuss the view of a possible peace with Hitler. The Government's objective was clearly not to avenge the attack on Poland, nor was it to defeat, let alone destroy, Germany. There was a marked lack of war-like rhetoric, notable mainly in the almost total absence of the word "victory" in official pronouncements. Instead words like "redeem" and "preserve" were common. It is also significant that the essential cause of the war was not Germany, nor even Hitler, but "aggression" - whether German or Nazi. If "aggression" could be prevented from being repeated, and if that of the past could be undone, then there would be no reason for war to continue. This last point is of crucial importance. It may appear both pedantic and irrelevant to the strategic realities of Europe, but it is central to an understanding of the Government's reaction to peace feelers from Germany to ascertain whether the removal of Hitler was an absolute

¹Hansard, 20th Sept., Vol.351., Column 978; also the King to Indian Parliament 11th Sept., Indian Office Library Mss Eur D 596/17.

²Chamberlain to Lord Tweedsmuir, 25th Sept., Chamberlain Papers. NC 7/11/32.

³Hansard, 26th Sept., Vol.351, Chamberlain also repeated this on 3rd Oct., Column 1856 of Hansard, when he said the aim was "to put an end to the successive acts of German aggression which menaced the freedom and the very security of all the nations of Europe".

⁴Prem 1/443 Halifax and Chamberlain to Lord Noel-Buxton 27th & 28th Sept.

⁵Chamberlain to Lord Woolton, 6th Sept., NC 7/11/32.

essential of Britain's war aims.¹ Before discussing this, however, one further point needs to be considered. The aim of Britain's declaration of war was to remove "aggression" from European relations, but "aggression" is too amorphous to be an objective in war, so it has to be determined over exactly what was victory desired. In the earlier noted interview with A.V. Alexander, Churchill quoted Asquith's declaration that "We shall not sheathe the sword until ...";² but until what? Chamberlain in announcing war declared "we have resolved to finish it", but how would they know when they had? Would it be when Hitler was removed from office, or would something else suffice? On occasion it was "the Nazi policy"³ the defeat of which would herald peace; other times it was that there could "be no peace in Europe" as long as Hitler's "Government exists and pursues the methods it has persistently followed during the last two years".⁴ Yet mostly the subject of the war, the removal of which would bring peace, was "Hitlerism". In declaring war Chamberlain hoped "to see the day when Hitlerism has been destroyed and a liberated Europe has been re-established" and ten days later repeated "that there can be no peace until the menace of Hitlerism has been finally removed".⁵ On 25 September the Secretary of State for India stated that "our sole aim at present is the destruction of Hitlerism".⁶ In the Foreign Office war aims memorandum quoted from earlier, the objective was expressed clearly. "At the same time" wrote Leeper, "it follows that if we are fighting against Hitlerism - to use a phrase which has now become current - we are fighting to undo the acts of aggression of which

¹Peter Ludlow '*The Unwinding of Appeasement*' in *Das Andere Deutschland im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Edited by Lothar Kettenacker. Stuttgart: Klett, 1977.

²18th Sept., interview with Churchill, Alexander Papers.

³Chamberlain to Tweedsmuir, 25th Sept., Chamberlain Papers. NC 7/11/32.

⁴Chamberlain, Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol.351, Col.132.

⁵Hansard, 3rd Sept., Vol.351, Col.392 and 13 Sept., Vol.351, Col.656. On 3rd Arthur Greenwood also declared that "Nazism must be finally overthrown".

⁶Lord Zetland to Linlithgow, India Office Mss Eur F 125/18. 25th Sept.

Hitlerism is guilty".¹ This sentence is of great interest. Not only does it confirm that it was indeed "Hitlerism", in its past, present and threatening future forms, that Britain was aiming to remove from international affairs, and that it is in this connection that the withdrawal of troops from Poland should be viewed, but it also gives a strangely impersonal analysis of the origins of the international unrest. It was not Hitler or the Nazi Party which were here defined as at the root of the problem, but "Hitlerism", or the policy pursued by Hitler over the past two years. Therefore, given that it was a policy that was the cause of international difficulties, there were two possible ways to overcome them. Either Hitler, the originator of the policy, would have to be removed, or else guarantees obtained which would prevent even Hitler continuing with that policy. Thus the idea of a possible distinction between Hitler and Hitlerism became important and it is necessary to ascertain the influence of this on reactions to peace feelers from Germany. Chamberlain hoped "to see the day when Hitlerism has been destroyed and a liberated Europe has been re-established". What must be discovered is whether or not there could be any place for Hitler in such a Europe. However curious such a suggestion may now appear, it was an idea of underlying importance at the time.

On 13 September the Daily Telegraph contained a leader article entitled "No Peace With Hitler",² claiming that this was now the policy of the Government. In fact, no such statement was made, either publicly or in Cabinet, during the first month of the war. Instead, as shown previously, it was always Hitler's policy - Hitlerism as a method of conducting international relations - which was cited as the difficulty. However, to say that there was no specific and public prohibition on a

¹FO 800/325 H/XXXIX/4 28th Sept. Which Cadogan regarded as 'sound'.

²Daily Telegraph, 13th Sept.

conference with the German Chancellor does not mean that a repeat of Munich was considered. The lack of a proscription against peace with Hitler was not due to a desire to produce another unstable settlement, but for exactly the reverse reason. The overriding aim was a peace that was truly secure. In comparison with such a lasting settlement all else, including peace with Hitler if necessary, had to be subordinate. As R.A. Butler said in the House of Commons on 27 September, the Government's aim was "the formation of a stable international system having as its object the prevention of war and the just settlement of international disputes by pacific means", but they were not prepared "to commit themselves" to "any particular procedure for achieving this aim".¹ It was the objective of a guaranteed peace which guided Chamberlain's policy, and if this necessitated a choice between a genuine and lasting agreement with Hitler or the collapse of Central Europe into anarchy or Bolshevism, then it was clear which way he felt Britain's interests would be best served. Lord Halifax was certainly of the view that the objective of the war was not so much the personal removal of Hitler, but - in Lord Robert Cecil's words - the elimination of "the German conception of international relations ...", because "if we merely went about to destroy Hitlerism something like the same result (as the replacement of the Kaiser by the Nazis) would follow".² The logic of this being that having tried to cure German aggression by defeating her in 1918, and failed, maybe some different procedure would achieve the desired result. As has been stated earlier, Chamberlain did not publicly commit himself to Hitler's removal. However, in one letter to his sisters, written on 10 September, he did write that "Of course the difficulty is with Hitler himself. Until he disappears and his system collapses, there can be no

¹ Hansard, 27th Sept., Vol. 351. Col. 1309. Answering questions for the Prime Minister. Also BBC News Bulletin, BBC(WAC).

² Cecil of Chelwood Papers, Talk with Lord Halifax, 26th Sept. Add Mss 51084.

peace".¹ This has been regularly quoted as evidence of the Prime Minister's outlook. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that this was the only occasion on which such sentiments were expressed. Although these letters are a valuable source of information, the sentences quoted ought not to be over-emphasised. Had Chamberlain based the Government's policy on the removal of Hitler, he surely would have declared as much, rather than merely allowing it to be believed that this was the case. It is true that he felt deeply hurt by the actions of the German Chancellor, and that his life's work had been undone, and on occasion Chamberlain's letters to his sisters indulge this bitterness and loathing. It is not unlikely, therefore, that this statement represents rather more of pique than policy, and that such pique would never be allowed to stand in the way of peace. In the same letter, Chamberlain also wrote that "half a dozen people could take my place while war is in progress and I do not see that I have any particular part to play ...", which also seems to be hardly the product of considered thought and gives added weight to the idea that it was written at a time of tired exasperation.

Another leading figure who appeared not to insist upon Hitler's removal was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon. In a talk with Joseph Kennedy at the end of September, Simon agreed with the US Ambassador that "if Hitler were gotten rid of, chaos would ensue in Germany and the country might well go Communist. The whole business would leave England and France mere shells". Rather than denying the force of this argument, the Chancellor weakly replied that "If they were to advocate any type of peace, they would be yelled down by their own people, who are determined to go on".² Thus, while recognising that Hitler's removal would cause problems at least as serious as those

¹*Chamberlain to sisters, 10th Sept. Chamberlain Papers. NC 18/1/1116.*

²*Koskoff. p.214.*

they now faced, Simon also alluded to the fact that support for a no-peace-with-Hitler policy was strong outside the inner circle of Government policy makers.

As referred to earlier, Lord Hankey, who although in the War Cabinet was little concerned with the formation of policy towards Germany, wrote that the objective was to "down Hitler and his rascally crew and rescue the decent German people, of whom there are many, from their gangsters".¹ This was echoed by Pownall, who noted the same day that "the Hitler regime must go".² The Times hoped that no more diplomatic documents "will ever pass between Herr Hitler and any British Government" as he had become "the final and irreconcilable foe of a peaceful Europe".³ Oliver Harvey, Halifax's private secretary at the Foreign Office, even wrote that "Hitler must go"⁴ is the slogan that Britain was presenting to the world. However, although this may have been the "slogan" representing policy, it was more of the nature of "a convenient slogan for something much more subtle ..." ⁵ than an accurate distillation of that policy.

In all Government announcements there was a strong element of propaganda, both for the home audience as Sir John Simon intimated and more importantly as "one must weigh every action in the light of its effect on German mentality",⁶ as the Prime Minister asserted. Therefore the fact that the Government allowed its position to be interpreted as "Hitler must go", without actually spelling it out, was a convenient way of influencing the "German mentality" without becoming tied down to anything definite in a very uncertain situation, thereby getting the best of both worlds.⁷ What it also prevented was the risk

¹ Hankey to his wife, 3rd Sept. HNKY 3/43.

² Pownall Diary, 3rd Sept.

³ The Times leader article, 5th Sept.

⁴ Harvey Diary, 5th Oct. British Library. Add Mss 56385.

⁵ In Halifax Papers, Borthwick Institute, York. A 2.278. No.15. 7th Oct.

⁶ Chamberlain to sisters, 10th Sept. Chamberlain papers. NC 18/1/1116.

⁷ In his memo on War Aims, Rex Leeper outlined the problem as "What steps can be taken to convince Germany that Hitler and his regime

of being seriously accused of wanting a compromise peace as at Munich instead of a settlement which had a reasonable guarantee of lasting more than a decade. When Harold Nicolson wrote that he believed "that the spirit of Horace Wilson still dominates our policy and that we really are playing for an arranged peace"¹, he was only wrong insofar as the Government was not prepared to retreat from certain minimum demands. These essential minima can be easily stated. The first was that any settlement must "undo these acts of aggression of which Hitlerism is guilty", which related to the restoration of "freedom for Czechoslovakia and Poland in general terms";² and possibly some alteration of Austria's status. The second was that the German Government must no longer pursue "the methods it has so persistently followed during the last two years".³ Or, as the Prime Minister later put it, Britain must gain the "defeat of that aggressive bullying mentality which seeks continually to dominate other peoples by force ...".⁴ Therefore, if the Germans were to evacuate Poland and post-Munich Czechoslovakia, even if they later received large parts of them after a Conference, and then proposed some form of Guarantee not to repeat their aggression, the major obstacles would have been removed. Was this, however, virtually the same as excluding Hitler, because for him to accept such pre-conditions would inevitably lead to his downfall? Although this would have been a distinct possibility, and a very welcome one in London, there is no evidence that such thinking was behind the formation of the Government's prerequisites. Instead they were motivated by the fundamental aim of securing a lasting peace, beyond which all else, possibly even a more realistic view of the

stand in the way of peace and that until they are overthrown Germany will have the greater part of the world against her?" and also stated that "our object" is "to defeat Hitler in Germany". FO 800/325, Oct.

¹Nicolson Diary. Balliol College, Oxford. Typescript. 27th Sept.

²FO 800/325, Oct. Leeper's memorandum on War Aims.

³Chamberlain, Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol. 351, Column 132.

⁴Broadcast 26th Nov. See The Times, 27th Nov.

European situation, was secondary.

What then was the reason for the widespread feeling that any negotiation with Hitler would be difficult in the extreme, if not impossible? Apart from the personal bitterness felt by the Prime Minister, in particular, towards the German Chancellor,¹ there were two related obstacles to even contemplating peace negotiations. The first of these was the overwhelming evidence of the Hitler years that aggression was an integral aspect of his foreign policy, rather than the way he responded to a crisis. On declaring war, the Prime Minister declared that as Hitler would never "give up his practice of using force to gain his will",² the allies too must resort to force. In the Dominion Secretary's phrase "Nazism" stood for "oppression, cruelty and broken faith".³ It was the Government's determination that "these methods must come to an end"⁴ which meant that before any peace could be considered Germany would have to renounce them. It was considered unlikely in the extreme that Hitler would have accepted the necessary humiliation of such an about face. However, even if this did take place an additional difficulty would then present itself. This was the complete lack of trust attached to the word of the German Government. In the words of Lord Hankey, the "cause of the present war was the continual use by Germany of force as an instrument of policy ... coupled with ... repeated and shameless breaches of his pledges and undertakings by Hitler",⁵ which meant that now "not the smallest reliance could be placed upon his word". On 3 October the Prime

¹Chamberlain to Lord McGowan, 5th Sept. "It is, as you say, terrible that we should be compelled by the wickedness of one man to do this thing. I can't tell you what distress it causes me ..." NC 7/11/32.

²BBC News Bulletins, BBC(WAC). One BBC variety script described this idea in the following way, "The Adolphians need a smacking to be taught their manners", but this was considered "undesirable" despite its accuracy. Wartime Propaganda News R 34/726 BBC(WAC).

³FO 371/24362, Broadcast to USA and Dominions, 11th Sept.

⁴Chamberlain. Hansard, 1st Sept, Vol. 351, Col. 132.

⁵Hankey Papers, Memo, 29th Sept. HNKY 11/2.

Minister emphasised this final point in telling the House of Commons that "No mere assurances from the present German Government could be accepted by us. For that Government have too often proved in the past that their undertakings are worthless when it suits them that they should be broken".¹ Statements such as this were often interpreted as meaning that there could be no negotiations with Hitler, for example by Oliver Harvey when claiming on 5 October that "Hitler must go"² was the slogan representing Government policy. Nevertheless this was not the meaning of the Prime Minister's statement. In September another example of this misinterpretation occurred when the Ministry of Information issued the following on the 11th:

"Hitler has made many promises to Foreign countries; none of them has been kept. It is therefore not surprising that no confidence is felt in any assurance he may give, and Great Britain is therefore justified in requiring that peace should be concluded with a German Government whose word may be trusted".³

The following day the Daily Telegraph carried this story under the headline "No peace possible with Hitler", which again had not been stated. In both of the above declarations, by Chamberlain and the Ministry of Information, what had been said was not that peace was impossible with Hitler, but that they could not trust any "mere assurances".⁴ This is a very different matter, because if proposals could be backed not by assurances but by some form of concrete guarantee, then the door to peace would be open. At least this was how it was seen in theory. This was emphasised by the way the Prime

¹Chamberlain, *Hansard*, 3rd Oct., Vol.351, Col.1856-7.

²Harvey *Diary*, 5th Oct. Add Mss 56385.

³*Daily Telegraph*, 12th Sept. Statement in response to Goering's speech of 9th Sept.

⁴The lack of significance can be judged from the fact that The Times did not mention the MoI statement at all.

Minister followed up the 3 October extract quoted previously: "If, therefore, proposals are made, we shall certainly examine them and we shall test them in the light of what I have just said".¹ In other words that Britain's aims must be satisfied and that peace must rest on something stronger than "mere assurances". Had peace with Hitler been unthinkable in itself, then proposals would have been neither examined nor tested - they would have been refused outright.

There was a widespread feeling that it would prove impossible to sign a peace with Hitler, yet this was due more to the conviction that he would not offer suitable terms and guarantees, rather than because talks should never be entered into. In September 1939, there was no clear Government desire to put Hitler beyond the pale of civilised dealings - merely a universal distrust of his motives, ambitions and veracity. What must next be ascertained is whether this lack of trust meant of itself that no negotiation could have taken place or whether this obstacle could be circumvented to the satisfaction of British Government and public opinion, and if such a circumvention was possible, was this only because the Government chose to ignore the reality of German strength or to downplay the fundamental nature of the issues involved. The allied determination was "to secure that the rule of violence shall cease, and that the word of Governments, once pledged, must henceforth be kept".² Therefore, for negotiations to succeed some way had to be found to tie Hitler's Government - or any German Government - to its pledged word. "It was" as Lord Halifax told the Cabinet on 5 October, "for the German side to suggest means of overcoming this difficulty ...", as the days of Britain offering solutions were now over.³ Nevertheless it appears that at least some members of the Cabinet were prepared to accept a solution to "this difficulty" short of the removal

¹ *Hansard*, 3rd Oct., Vol.351, Col.1857.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Cab 65/3*, WM 38(39)8, 5th Oct.

of Hitler. Lord Hankey thought that "we have no alternative but to fight on to victory unless we can, per impossibile, obtain acceptable terms and guarantees".¹ Lord Halifax, in the House of Lords on 4 October, outlined the conditions under which any peace proposals would have to be considered. These were described in the Royal Institute of International Affairs' "Memorandum on War and Peace Aims", of 9 January 1940, as relating "to the conditions in which they were offered, to the Government which offered them, and to the security which might be thought to attach to any agreement to which they might conceivably lead". Although the nature of the Government offering terms was an important factor, there is no evidence that acceptable proposals from a Nazi Government would be rejected if they offered adequately guaranteed security. As previously shown, the Prime Minister was prepared to examine any peace proposals against a similar yardstick to that of the Foreign Secretary. It would be inaccurate, however, to say that any Cabinet Minister expected acceptable terms and guarantees to be offered in the near future. If it was "quite impossible for Hitler to agree" to such proposals during the days preceding war, it was, wrote Halifax on 6 September, "Much more so, I am afraid, now".²

There was therefore no theoretical objection, after a month of war, on the part of the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Lord Hankey, to a peace treaty with the existing German Government which satisfied both Britain's territorial and security guarantee demands. (The acceptability of this from the French viewpoint will be discussed later.) This would, in their view, entail no compromise on Britain's position, not even on the aims of defeating "Hitlerism". Lord Halifax addressed himself to this issue on 16 September, and his reasoning is highly instructive of Government thinking at the time. After noting

¹*Hankey Papers, HNKY 11/2, 29th Sept.*

²*Halifax to Bishop Carey, FO800/317 H/XV/277, 6th Sept.*

that the "evacuation and liberation of Poland" was essential, he continued thus;

"But if by a miracle discussion on such a basis was proved possible, I should feel that the system of Hitler's Government had been in fact brought to acknowledgment of failure and that the principal purpose which I hope we may keep in view - i.e. the elimination of that evil thing while avoiding all vindictive treatment of the German nation - had in fact been achieved. I wish I could think such a consummation was nearer than I fear it is".¹

"Hitlerism" was the "system of Hitler's Government", particularly its aggressive foreign policy. Once this system had acknowledged its failure by negotiating an agreement acceptable to Britain, then a non-vindictive peace could be concluded. There was no question of making what was often referred to as a patched-up peace with Hitler, only a guaranteed one. Yet despite this belief that some form of guarantee was possible, the best security was still thought of as the Fuhrer's removal and replacement by those who had achieved that removal. In later Chapters the possible nature of any guarantee will be discussed, but the essential prerequisite in each case was that the policy of aggression should have been shown to have failed.

The Government's war aims, and therefore its attitudes towards a negotiated peace, were greatly influenced not exclusively by the desire to remove Hitler, but to "defeat Hitlerism", by which was usually meant that the German's repudiate their aggressive policy, which may or may not have resulted in a change of regime. Their principal concern was to secure effective guarantees against a repetition of that aggression, with other issues being of distinctly

¹FO 800/317 Halifax to Cannon Marriott H/XV/282, 16th Sept.

secondary nature. There can be no question of the Government's determination to achieve this.

War aims were not considered in isolation and behind their adoption were a variety of factors which can be outlined briefly. One of the most important, and a persistent influence on British foreign policy over the previous twenty years and which the outbreak of war in no way eradicated, was the desire to avoid both the destruction and the consequences of another Great War. Towards the end of October, the deputy editor of The Times wrote that "Everyone would agree that more Passchendaeles and reliance upon mass would be a fundamental mistake".¹ John Colville, one of Chamberlain's private secretaries, has written that the Prime Minister "felt that his life's work was to prevent a repetition of the appalling massacres of the First World War",² and that this feeling continued even after September 1939. This impression is backed up by Chamberlain himself when on 23 September he wrote of the winning of the war, "If we can do that without bloodshed I should rejoice. The loss of all those men in the Courageous weighs on my mind".³ Chamberlain and the many who thought like him continued to be revolted by the human cost of war, and this was compounded by the conviction that such destruction would be both futile and ultimately destructive of peace. He continued the above letter "... and I do not believe that holocausts are required to gain the victory while they are certainly likely to lose us the peace".⁴ This attitude is not surprising given the Prime Minister's conviction that the conflict with Germany had largely resulted from the vindictive peace of Versailles, which had itself occurred as a consequence of the bitterness

¹The Times Archive, Barrington-Ward to Liddell Hart, 27th Oct.

²John Colville, Transcripts of "The World at War", Imperial War Museum.

³Chamberlain to sisters, 23rd Sept. NC 18/1/1122.

⁴*Ibid*; Letter from Sir Ernest Benn, to Sir John Simon, 2nd Oct.

"Just as with L.G. twenty-five years ago, Winston would succeed in rousing the lower instincts of the nation, and lead us merrily along the 1914-31 road, ending in the War of 1960". Simon Correspondence Simon Papers, Bodleian Library. Mss Simon 85.

of the war, and its economic, human and social devastation. No permanent peace could be established if it had been undermined beforehand by a repeat of the conditions of 1914-18. This belief that total war would frustrate Britain's essential war aim was an important constraint upon the Government's thinking. Liddell Hart's view that to "seek victory in a modern "great war" might merely lead us into a bottomless quicksand"¹ was not far removed from that which dominated Whitehall at this time.

Another influence which led many members of the Government to believe that a modern "great war" was inappropriate was the conviction that they did "not believe that holocausts are required to gain the victory."² The Prime Minister thought that the way to triumph was to convince the Germans that they could not win,³ and that the propaganda war of nerves "would have an important effect on German public opinion"⁴ leading to peace. This was because it was felt that the morale of Germany's population, or at least a significant part of it, was "greatly disaffected"⁵ and that a few months of war hardship would cause severe problems. Added to this would be the effect of the boredom of stalemate on the reputation of a ruler who "has to live on success".⁶ The expectation - or more accurately wishful hope - of a revolt or a coup within Germany was so widespread that many were convinced that the war would be a short one. Geoffrey Dawson, editor of The Times, noted that Halifax "still believes in a short war, that the Germans may crack".⁷ Churchill believed that the weakness in

Liddell Hart Papers, "A personal problem", 14th Sept.

¹ *Notes and Memoranda, 1939/109.*

² *Chamberlain letter to sisters, 23rd Sept. NC 18/1/1125.*

³ *Ibid.; also Dawson Diary, 30th Oct. Bodleian Library. Mss Dawson 43.*

⁴ *Cab 65/1, WM (39) 1, 3rd Sept.; also Lothian to David Astor,*

25th Sept. Lothian Papers, GD 40/17/398.

⁵ *Martin Gilbert, Finest Hour, Winston Churchill 1939-1941. London: Heinemann 1983. p.37. Subsequently: Gilbert.*

⁶ *Chatfield to Lothian, 26th Sept., Chatfield Papers. CHT/6/2.*

⁷ *Dawson Diary, 24th Sept., Mss Dawson 43.*

Germany, particularly economic, would be bound to become plain very quickly.¹ Sir Henry 'Chips' Channon wrote on 9 September that although "the French fear that it (the war) will last at least until the Spring of 1941; here we are optimistic", and on 3 September, in a most fanciful statement, he wrote "If only we can win a quick war and dislodge the Nazi regime that would mean a Neville victory, a November election and triumph".² This thinking, however unrealistic, certainly helped to create the climate of thought about both war aims and the possibility of peace.

Such exaggerated expectations of Germany's problems, known now to have been based upon incorrect intelligence reports and over-optimistic interpretations, were suspected by some to be false at the time. On 10 September, Admiral Cunningham wrote that the newspapers "are full of unrest in Germany, but I don't think one can count on that to win the war quickly. It is I think a case of wishful thinking",³ and as early as 18 September the Chiefs of Staff, in a report on "The possible future course of the war", wrote that although there "have been various reports and rumours of internal unrest in Germany" they concluded "We therefore exclude the possibility of German military power being overthrown as the result of an internal revolution".⁴ Significantly, little heed was given to this opinion because in general the war was not held to be concerned so much with "German military power", as with a political change within Germany. This perceived separation of Germany's military strength and political stability was

¹Gilbert p.37, 19th Sept.; and p.50, 1st Oct. Broadcast, after which Chamberlain wrote "I take the same view as Winston". NC 18/1/1123, 1st Oct. and FO 837/5, 2nd Oct. MEW note on German weaknesses, especially financially. Within Germany, General Halder, according to Deutsch "insisted that a shock of confidence in Hitler, such as bombings of industrial centres or an initial military setback, could produce the climate for a coup". Deutsch, p.48.

²Channon Diary, 9th and 3rd Sept.

³Cunningham Papers, 10th Sept. British Library, Add Mss 52558.

⁴Cab 66/1, WP (39) 33, 18th Sept.

one of the main reasons why most of the War Cabinet felt able to draw up war aims which did not take adequate account of the military realities.

Despite the strictures of the Chiefs of Staff, the Government was very persistent - without exception - in the belief that Germany was extremely susceptible to limited, economic warfare. The victory which such means could have achieved, particularly had a collapse within Germany occurred out of a narrowly political coup d'etat rather than a social revolution, would have satisfied the Government's aims almost to the letter. Thus because such a victory was deemed possible, it was aimed for, and any aims - such as the defeat of the German armed forces - which would have obstructed such a victory were scrupulously avoided. Although, as Liddell Hart wrote, this relied upon "a revolt in Germany - which is a mere gamble",¹ the alternative of an all-out struggle was generally unacceptable.

A third influence which led to the adoption of limited war aims was the difficulty in seeing how the Allies could defeat Germany militarily - other than in the very long run. Therefore, rather than to state aims whose implementation would be dependent upon a victory over Germany at least as complete as that of 1918, the Government instead set out to achieve that which it thought possible. On 4 October,

Richard Stokes MP, a persistent campaigner against the war, wrote in a circular letter to MPs; "Does anybody believe that we can force both Germany and Russia to give up a bit of the country they have divided between them. The only possible way is negotiation".² Although Stokes' conclusion was only that of a minority, a minority whose strength will be discussed at a later stage, his analysis of the difficulties facing Britain was widespread. After only four days of war, Sir

¹Liddell Hart, 14th Sept. "A Personal Problem". Notes and Memoranda 1939/40.
²FO 800/325 H/XXXIX/18, 4th Oct.

Alec Cadogan gloomily wrote in his diary "Very depressed. We shall fight to the last, and may win - but I confess I don't see how!".¹ When the Russians entered Poland the position looked even bleaker. "Now the Nazis and the Bolshevicks (sic.) have combined to destroy civilisation, the outlook for the world looks ghastly", wrote Sir Henry 'Chips' Channon.² Yet the participation of the Soviet Union in the occupation of Poland was not of great significance to British thinking about the war. Instead of causing fundamental re-evaluation of people's attitudes it tended merely to confirm their previously held positions. For Chamberlain and Halifax, still the principal motivators of Government thinking, it brought into sharper relief the impossibility of a military defeat of Germany and the wisdom of avoiding a specific commitment to the precise restoration of Poland, and also increased the probability of a revolt against the Nazis within Germany. For those who doubted the wisdom of the war in the first place, it was yet more confirmation of the Government's folly.

Another effect of the estimate of Allied strength as inferior to the task of militarily defeating Germany was to reinforce the view that the main aim of allied strategy was to delay any actual fighting, except of course at sea, until both Germany had been worn down and the Allied strength, particularly British strength, had been built up.³ Until a position of superiority was reached the war was to be one of economic attrition without military wastage while the army and air

¹Cadogan Diary, 6th Sept. ACAD 1/8.; Also 10th Sept. Letter to R.A. Butler "I confess I am unable to see how either side can possibly win, and if the Germans really stick to the defensive it is simply a question of going on until one side is tired of it, which may not be for ten years", R.A. Butler Papers, File A160.

²Channon Diary, 17th Sept. Two days later he wrote "What I have always half foreseen, half feared as a nightmare, is now a possibility, that is, an entire alteration in the European system with the power of Russia enormously strengthened. There will indeed be some sort of Bolshevik regime over most of Europe". p.220.

³The most succinct summary of this is in Oliver Harvey's Diary, 18th Sept. Add Mss 56395.

force were expanded.¹

It is therefore possible to say that the British Government adopted its limited war aims in September for the three types of reason outlined. In all of these the most important influence was a strict adherence to the maintenance of the direct relationship between the ends desired and the means used to achieve them. In this the longer term goal of a guaranteed and stable peace was paramount.

Before leaving the subject of the Government's initial war aims it is necessary to note that these objectives were not merely of academic significance and did not only relate to the resolution of the conflict. Martin Gilbert, in volume six of his Churchill biography, has written that the "priorities of war policy were imposed not by the needs of the strategic situation, but by the dictates of pre-war neglect".² Although not denying that the woeful shortages of equipment and trained men were significant, it must also be said that "the dictates" of what Britain was trying to achieve - or more particularly of what they wished to prevent - rated highly in Government minds. The fact that the early stages of the war were ones of inactivity was not merely because there was little that could be done, but in addition because Chamberlain wanted little to be done. This was a state of affairs happily concurred with, although for differing reasons, by the French Government. This resulted in what is usually referred to as the "Phoney War", but was variously described at the time as "the war of appeasement", or even "The Chocolate Soldier War".³

¹ Roderick MacLeod and Dennis Kelly, (Eds.) *The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940*. London: Constable, 1962. 7th Sept. p.104.

Subsequently: *Ironside Diary*. On 10th Sept. Dudley Pound asked the Chiefs of Staff Committee whether "It would be desirable to force the pace with the Germans and thereby drive them to a greater expenditure on munitions ...". It was agreed "that it was necessary to hold a careful balance ... between forcing the pace with Germany at the expense of our own resources." In practice conservation was paramount. Cab 79/1, COS (39) 9.

² Gilbert, p.30.

³ Robert Boothby to Lloyd George, LG/G/Box 3, 10th Sept.; L.F.Burgis *Memoirs* Burgis Papers. Churchill College Cambridge.

The main possible offensive activity in September, other than the campaign against the U-boats and surface raiders, was the commencement of bombing against military objectives in Germany. However, even Churchill only wanted bombing "on the immediate zone in which the French armies are operating".¹ There were many reasons for this hesitation, of which the fear of reprisal and of alienating foreign support - particularly in the USA and Dominions - were of the most significance. But it was also the case, as Leo Amery commented, that with the exception of Churchill the War Cabinet was "entirely devoid of the offensive fighting spirit".² Had bombing taken place this would not have been a real attempt at gaining military advantage, but as the Chancellor of the Exchequer recorded in his diary, would have been part of the Allies' propaganda campaign. He wrote "... it is very difficult to decide, whether in order to demonstrate the reality of our intervention, we should stage some positive attack on Germany by air at this moment".³ Nevertheless, even this was "too much to consider"⁴ for Chamberlain. Although there had been hopes of France taking unilateral action against the Siegfried Line in the early days of September, in general planning was not for immediate war, but "in terms of war in 6 months time",⁵ or even longer. This fitted very well with the Government's view of the war as one in which active fighting might be unnecessary. If there was a real possibility of either a withdrawal by Hitler or of a coup d'etat in Germany then any offensive action - particularly against civilians - would put an end to this. Therefore the dictates of equipment and personnel shortages dovetailed neatly into the self-imposed restrictions of Government thinking about the war.

¹Gilbert p.23. Churchill to Chamberlain, 10th Sept.

²Gilbert p.11.

³Simon Diary, 10th Sept. Mss Simon 11.

⁴Ironside Diary, 10th Sept. p.106.

⁵Alanbrooke Diary, 11th Oct. Alanbrooke Collection 5/1. King's College London.

If war was not to be waged actively, argued the Government, it was to be prepared for with total commitment. The final communiqué of the first meeting of the Supreme War Council stated that Britain and France would "devote their entire strength and resources to the waging of the conflict that has been forced upon them ..."¹ Yet among those involved with this preparation in Britain there was concern whether the commitment was in fact "entire". The War Minister, Hore-Belisha, urged on 18 September that "the country should be roused to make far greater efforts and sacrifices than are at present contemplated. There must be greater efforts in production, particularly in land armaments".² Four days later he was still unsure whether maximum priority was being given to production because of the concern for the conservation of reserves. However, he argued, "Suppose you lose the war, all the most careful expenditure will have gone down the drain".³ General Ironside also felt rather uneasy. "It is no 4th Form school-boy effort now" he wrote on 14 September, "and I cannot get people to understand that it is serious. The more I look into our strategic position the more serious does it seem", adding a couple of days later "It is terrifying, the complacency of these people".⁴ After this burst of campaigning to "get people to understand that it is serious", the next that Ironside wrote on the subject is the series of rather pathetic entries in his Diary on 15 May, 1940. On this date he lamented, "Nobody believed that we should be engaged in war, certainly not in a death struggle so soon. We made no preparations, even for war industry to be developed, and we cannot catch up". This was followed up with an "exhortation for all senior officers" about the "false theory" of "economic warfare without fighting", and with what was very nearly

¹Cab 99/3, SWC (39/40) 1, 12th Sept. *Supreme War Council*.

²*The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha*, Edited by R.J. Minney. London: Collins. 1960. Entry for 18th Sept. pp.240-241. Subsequently: Minney.

³Minney, p.243, 22nd Sept.

⁴*Ironside Diary*, 14th & 16th Sept. p.107.

Britain's epitaph "So we have wasted eight months of precious time not realising that the war was serious".¹ When one considers the fact that Ironside was C.I.G.S. for almost all of the period, it has to be asked why he did not make more attempts to insist that the defects in preparation were remedied, as even he appears to have come under the sway of what one may describe as Treasury thinking and control.

One of the main reasons for the lack of all-out effort was, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer insisted, that every one of these decisions should be taken "in the light of the exchange position".² Before further examination of the reasons for the less than whole-hearted effort, an accurate assessment of the extent of this lack can be gained from the Official History of British War Production. Here M.M. Postan has written "In the year and a half separating Munich from Dunkirk the nation was preparing for a "show down", but was not yet exposed to the rigours of full fledged war and was not yet putting out its highest efforts", and that production "did not accelerate sufficiently to mark off the period of disturbed peace from that of dormant war".³

There was therefore by no means the devotion of the "entire strength and resources" of Britain to production for the war, and one of the reasons advanced for this, especially at the time, was that the "War Cabinet decided to base their policy upon the assumption that the war will last for three years or more".⁴ However, at the same time it was made clear that this "does not mean that they think that Germany can hold out for three years",⁵ with the Prime Minister obviously finding the prospect of announcing that war might continue for that

¹*Ironside Diary*, 15th May, 8th June & 10th June. p.310, 358, and 361.

²*Simon Diary*, 7th Oct. *Mss Simon* 11.

³M.M. Postan, *British War Production. The Official History of the Second World War*. London: H.M.S.O., 1952. pp.53-54.;
See also pp.76 and 81.

⁴Prem 1/377, 10th Sept. *Statement for issue to the press*.

⁵FO 371/22946, 10th Sept. *Telegram to India*.

long very hard to bear.¹ In reality the three-year war announcement had less to do with production policy than with propaganda policy; the aim being to defeat an attempt by the German Government to offer "peace" after the over-running of Poland by "countering it in advance".² Again the war politicians war of words had pride of place over the real war of men and supplies.

Despite the expressed determination to fight for three years or more, during the first month of war there was considerable hope that this would prove unnecessary. In discussing the 10 September declaration, the comment of The Times is of great interest; "... we must prepare now for the possibility that the task of destroying that power (i.e. Germany) will be long, however much we may hope that it will be short".³ This hope of a short war proved to have a debilitating effect upon British preparation for fighting. In order to build up a reasonable offensive capacity, the effort required would have been truly prodigious or, in the Chancellor's words, "a stupendous task",⁴ which would require major economic relocation. When Euan Wallace heard of the increase in income tax in the first war budget he described it as "a considerable bombshell" and an "extremely drastic"⁵ measure, yet it was still woefully short of what would be required if Britain was to take an active part in defeating Germany. In the light of the "extremely drastic" consequences of full-scale preparation, any hope that it might prove to be unnecessary was seized upon. After the Land Forces Committee had recommended that Britain's immediate target should be an army of fifty-five divisions, the Cabinet's discussions of this revealed not only the perception of the financial difficulties involved in providing for an army, but at the same time showed how the idea of a

¹*Ironside Diary*, 10th Sept. p.106.

²*Simon Diary*, 10th Sept. Mss Simon 11.

³*The Times*, 11th Sept.

⁴*Simon Diary*, 28th Sept. Mss Simon 11.

⁵*Wallace Diary*, 27th Sept. Mss Eng Hist. c 495.

short war - either through German collapse or the finding of an acceptable peace - influenced production policy. Chamberlain said that unless "we planned now, our scheme would not come to fruition on time. This would cost a certain amount of money and effort, but not commit us to carrying out the programme to its full extent at any particular time, or indeed at all. On the other hand unless the plans were initiated now, it might prove to be too late".¹ The result of this was that the fifty-five division objective was treated "rather as a target to be aimed at than as a scheme well within our present powers",² and that an "astronomical number like 55 divisions" was meaningless.³ The main factors behind Britain's preparation for war which "is the key to the whole of our conduct in the early phase",⁴ were firstly that active warfare would not take place for some time,⁵ and secondly that it might not take place at all. This encouraged a lack of urgency which was nearly to prove Britain's undoing later in 1940. From September 1939 the Government fought a war of limited aims with an equally less than total commitment to diverting economic resources to war production. Whether the limitation in commitment to prepare for victory was dependent upon the similar restriction on desired aims is hard to prove, but while not denying the significance of other factors, the possibility that total effort would not be required certainly contributed to the wasting of "eight months of precious time not realising that the war was serious".⁶

The clearest area where war aims affected one of the major aspects of war policy was in the field of propaganda; the declaration of those aims. Before the war started it was decided that the RAF

¹Cab 66/1, WM (39)21, 5th Sept.

²Simon Diary, 23rd Sept. Mss Simon 11.

³Ironside Diary, 24th Oct. p.134.

⁴The Times, Leader, 21st Sept.

⁵As a member of the French Embassy staff quipped, Britain was "preparing not for a war to last three years, but for a war to begin at the end of three years". Dalton Diary, 21st Sept. Dalton Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science. Part 1/21.

⁶Ironside Diary, 10th June 1940. p.361.

should drop propaganda leaflets over Germany in an attempt to foment unrest. On the commencement of hostilities hundreds of thousands of leaflets were scattered over German cities, despite the fact that this "confetti war" came under strong criticism from the public and from within the Foreign Office.¹ These leaflets, as with other forms of propaganda, concentrated on the line that Hitler was responsible for the war and that the Allies had no desire for a retributive peace. This policy was persisted with until the Spring of 1940, despite the above-mentioned opposition, because had it been successful then the way to a lasting peace would have been open. Although it was something of an exaggeration to say that the leaflet dropping was backed "as if it was going to win the war",² there certainly was a hope among its supporters, especially the Prime Minister, that it could help to unlock an impossible position. Propaganda was given a very high priority under the Chamberlain administration because the exploitation of the perceived weakness of the German "home front" was seen as the main opportunity for a rapid conclusion to the war upon reasonable terms.

¹FO 371/23101, 10th Sept.

²Harvey Diary, 11th Sept. Add Mss 56395.

CHAPTER 2

FIRST THOUGHTS ON THE PROBLEMS OF NEGOTIATING A SETTLEMENT

As has been shown in the previous chapter, the fulfilment of the Government's initial war aims was expected to take place by negotiation with a German Government which had proved that it had abandoned force as an instrument of policy. This would be partly evidenced by a willingness to make some amends for past actions. It was hoped that the achievement of this would not necessitate "a repetition of the appalling massacres of the First World War".¹ Therefore, from the very outset of war the Government was alert to the question of a negotiated peace. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyse the expectations of, and reactions to, possible peace feelers during the first weeks of the war.

On the day of the German attack on Poland, Chamberlain told the House of Commons that:

"No man can say that the Government could have done more to try and keep open the way for an honourable and equitable settlement of the dispute between Germany and Poland".²

How then would the Government react if, after imposing their own "settlement of the dispute between Germany and Poland", the Germans proposed that peace be restored? Although such a peace could hardly be called "honourable and equitable", it would nonetheless be peace, and therefore had much to recommend it.

That there would be an attempt to persuade the Allies to accept the fait accompli in Poland was beyond doubt. As early as 5 September Cadogan wrote "Hitler will conquer Poland and then make peace offer ...".³

¹John Colville, "World at War" transcripts, Imperial War Museum, of Chamberlain's attitude.

²Hansard, 1st Sept., Vol. 351, Col. 127.

³Cadogan Diary, 5th Sept. ACAD 1/8. All dates in this chapter are 1939 unless otherwise stated.

Chamberlain concurred with this in a letter to his sisters on 10 September, and Lord Hankey in an appreciation of the opening of the war wrote "we shall receive from Germany some kind of peace offer for a settlement with Poland which may be superficially at any rate plausible in character".¹ This uniformity of opinion as to the certainty of a peace attempt was not surprising given Hitler's tactics after previous acts of aggression. It did, however, raise the question of how it should be reacted to. The Chiefs of Staff felt able to "assume ... that it would be rejected by Great Britain and France",² as did Samuel Hoare and Winston Churchill, the latter reasoning that Britain should "agree to nothing that will help him [Hitler] out of his troubles, and to leave him to stew in his own juices during the winter ...".³ So confident in fact had the Ministry of Information been that any peace offer would be declined that a poster was prepared bearing the simple statement "BRITAIN TO HITLER - NO!"⁴ In the event this poster was not used, as the Prime Minister did not view the question of a reply in such straightforward terms. Although he thought that "the difficulties in the way of a peace" were "very formidable", this did not mean that any offer would automatically be rejected. Instead he wrote, although "I don't myself see the way out. Of course we are all continually speculating about future developments".⁵ Chamberlain was decidedly nervous about the affects of a peace offer,⁶ not because he regarded peace resulting from an approach by a German Government as wrong, but because it was still "too early".⁷ Exactly what was

¹Chamberlain Papers, letter 10th Sept. NC 18/1/1116; Hankey Memorandum "War Policy" 12th Sept. HNKY 11/1

²Cab 66/1, WP (39) 33. Report on "The possible future course of the war". 18th Sept.

³Beaverbrook Papers, House of Lords Library. Bbk c/308, 1st Oct.; Gilbert, p.45, 25th Sept.; Harvey Diary, 8th Oct. Add Mss 56395.

⁴INF 1/6, mid-Sept.

⁵Chamberlain letter to sisters, 17th Sept. NC 18/1/1121

⁶Chamberlain. NC 18/1/1122, 23rd Sept.; Inskip Diary, 26th Sept. and 9th Sept. Inskip Papers, Churchill College Cambridge.

⁷Chamberlain letter to sisters, 8th Sept. NC 18/1/1115

meant by this will be examined shortly, but it does serve to create the correct framework for the discussion of what were usually termed "peace-feelers". Many members of the Government hoped that a long war would prove unnecessary¹ and that reasonably soon a lasting peace would be restored. As stated earlier, it was the search for such a guaranteed peace which provided the backbone of British war aims. It also dominated thinking about German and neutral attempts to secure peace, and nowhere is this shown more clearly than in two letters written in reply to Lord Noel-Buxton's request that an early peace be considered seriously. Lord Halifax's response was "I would, as I suppose would everybody else, give nearly everything I possess to see a secure and honourable peace made early, but I am not prepared to do this unless it is, in fact, secure". While Chamberlain's reply was that "there is nothing which we more eagerly desire than a genuine peace, but we must make sure that it is a peace that will last".² Therefore in outline the twin considerations affecting the Government's response to a peace offer of any sort were an almost overwhelming desire for peace, tempered by an equal determination that such a peace would be secure and lasting. With this framework in mind, it can now be shown what were the specific influences at work behind the anticipated and actual responses to peace feelers.

To do this, an initial review of the approaches of leading Government figures will be conducted as they faced up to the question of how to deal with a peace offer. This will be combined with an analysis of a few of the early assumptions about their reactions to peace proposals in general, and to those of the ex-Chancellor von Papen and the Swedish businessman and friend of Goering, Birger Dahlerus, in particular. After a

¹See Channon Diary, 9th Sept., "I heard today at the Foreign Office that the French fear that it [*i.e.* the war] will last until the spring of 1941; here we are more optimistic", p.219.

²Prem 1/443, 27th & 28th Sept.

look at the extent and nature of the support for an immediate peace, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the expectation that Hitler would make an attempt to end the war, along with the other moves which seemed to herald and accompany this attempt.

On 27 September, R.A. Butler in reply to a Parliamentary question on behalf of the Prime Minister about "Britain's peace terms", gave the following statement; "His Majesty's Government desires the formation of a stable international system having as its object the prevention of war and the just settlement of international disputes by pacific means. They do not, however, regard it as desirable to commit themselves at this stage to any particular procedure for achieving this aim".¹ Although the Government was not prepared to "commit themselves to any particular procedure" there had been much discussion of the attitude to be taken to the "procedure" that they were likely to have to deal with first, that of a direct attempt by the German Government to call off the war.

In the reviews of the "War Policy" by Lord Hankey, referred to earlier, he wrote that "almost at any moment, we shall receive from Germany some kind of peace offer for a settlement with Poland which may be superficially at any rate plausible in character".² Reactions to this challenge showed that various factors were crucial to the Government's response to a peace appeal. To Chamberlain and Halifax peace was unacceptable because the German Government had not yet been forced to admit that they had failed, that "they could not win".³ Instead it would be "a specious suggestion"⁴ by a Government which had not yet been made trustworthy; the Allies' task being to fight until Germany had such a trustworthy Government.⁵ Indeed to many, a prompt peace offer, instead of showing that the Germans desired to establish peace, would have shown their deep apprehensions

¹Hansard, 27th Sept., Vol.351, Col.1310.

²Hansard, 24th Aug., Vol.351, Cols.9-10.

³Chamberlain. NC 18/1/1124, 8th Oct.; Halifax letter, 16th Sept., FO 800/317, H/XV/282.

⁴Chamberlain letter to sisters, 23rd Sept. NC 18/1/1122.

⁵Daily Telegraph, 12th Sept., Ministry of Information statement.

about their own ability to continue with the war. Lord Chatfield thought Hitler might "have to play for peace"¹ and Halifax also believed that the war would be short. Therefore, to increase pressure and make it clear that Britain expected a great deal more in the nature of concessions and guarantees appeared to be the way to respond to any early peace feeler. In this an important, though unspoken, assumption was that the Allies' position would improve with time as Hitler's deteriorated.

Whatever the nature of the peace offer made, it was "very difficult to find the way to the sort of peace which HMG would expect", and the Prime Minister did not "see the way out".² Therefore, any response would not only be motivated by the desire to bring a genuine settlement of the conflict closer, but would be influenced by the desire to exploit the propaganda value of the occasion. In the memorandum on "War Policy" quoted from earlier, Lord Hankey wrote that the "reply to the coming peace offer" would be "the next step in the war of nerves". This could, it was suggested, "be couched in terms of sorrow rather than of anger".³ At the end of September Hankey elaborated on this theme, emphasising the importance of stressing "our earnest desire for peace" and concern for "justice".⁴ The purpose of this discussion or the exact nature of the reply to a German peace offer was partly, as Smuts counselled on 4 October, to prevent any serious weakening of the "at present firm and unanimous will to resist", and to avoid being seen as making a "tacit admission" of self-doubt by not rejecting any offer firmly enough.⁵ The tendency to see the whole issue of a German peace feeler as, in Hankey's words, part of "the war of nerves" was common, with the three-year-war declaration

¹*Chatfield Papers*, 26th Sept., CH7/6/2, Chatfield to Lothian; Dawson Diary, Mss Dawson 43. Also this was the thinking behind Churchill's earlier comment that Hitler should be left to "stew in his own juice".

²Cab 21/952, Halifax, 5th Oct. Letter to Ambassador in Lisbon.

³Hansard 24th Aug., Vol. 351, Cols. 9-10.

⁴Hankey Papers, Hankey Memorandum, 29th Sept. HNKY 11/2

⁵Smuts' telegram, 4th Oct., discussed the following day by War Cabinet. Cab 66/2, WP (39) 71, 5th Oct.

being the first example of this.¹ For Britain the propaganda problem created was that to decline peace would mean that it was the Allies who could be seen as responsible for the continuation of war, and this was expected to pose considerable difficulties on the "home front, the Dominions, and the USA".² Concern over these last-mentioned areas represented what may be termed the negative aspect of propaganda policy, where great care had to be taken to "make clear our earnest desire for peace", but at the same time "insist that it must be a just and enduring settlement".³ By this method it was hoped to avoid any dangerous isolation either of Britain in the world, or of the Government vis-a-vis the population, while at the same time seeking to create just such difficulties within Germany.

Another early consideration was the desire by some to use the uncertainty created by a peace offer to "gain time for our preparations"⁴ and reduce the possibility of German attack until the weather made it impracticable anyway. Such a military approach was not common, while at the other end of the spectrum, although there were occasional rumours that the Government were "beginning to wonder how we can get out of our difficulties" by accepting a "reasonable offer ... in order to save our faces",⁵ this was never seriously discussed. Instead, the considerations which influenced the responses to peace feelers can be easily outlined. The first of these was the feeling that "Germany was on the verge of starvation", or could soon be brought there by economic strangulation,⁶ and that allied to this there was little deep-rooted support for the Nazis. Therefore, all efforts must be concentrated on this "weakest point",⁷

¹*Simon Diary*, 10th Sept., *Mss Simon* 11.

²*Chamberlain letters to sisters*, 23rd Sept., NC 18/1/1122.

³*Hankey Papers memorandum*, HNKY 11/2, 29th Sept.

⁴*Amery Diary*, 28th Sept., reporting conversation with Vansittart; also *Hoare Diary*, 2nd Oct., *Templewood Papers*, Cambridge University. Vol. XI/2.

⁵*Lloyd George Papers*, House of Lords. LG/G/Box 24, 29th Sept.

⁶*John Colville*, "World at War" transcripts.

Also *Halder Diary*, cited in, *Deutsch*, p.48.

⁷*Chamberlain letters to sisters*, 17th Sept., NC 18/1/1121.

especially the use of peace propaganda so that by "the winter we may see cracks".¹ Whether there would be quick German collapse or not, British action, including replies to peace attempts, were designed to make the most of any weakness that was believed to exist, although a more accurate assessment of German morale after the crushing victory over Poland ought to have suggested that this weakness was largely illusory.

A second criterion was that any peace should reasonably be expected to last; indeed it was hoped that the decision to fight would turn out to "be a step towards a lasting peace".² There did, however, appear to be no reason for supposing that Hitler was "prepared to pay the price (i.e. in terms of retreat, reparation and guarantee) so that there is no reasonable prospect of a peace such as we would accept".³ Neither was there any "over-riding consideration which would justify ... accepting a humiliating peace offer".⁴ Therefore, the stalemate was set to continue, while the Government sought "a peace that will last".⁵

Until the genuine possibility of a secure peace presented itself, the Government confined itself to giving "no more than [its] general attitude towards any peace offer".⁶ This was very much the position of the Prime Minister, whose control of British policy was still absolute,⁷ but had a peace offer which held out hope of a lasting settlement been made then in all likelihood it would have been pursued in the hope of making "as generous a peace as we could with the German people".⁸ This would have been difficult to broadcast to publicly, but in private there was some willingness to go a very long way in matching a German offer which promised some guarantee of good faith.⁹

¹Hoare Diary and "Notes on Position", 10th Sept., Vol.XI/2.

²Chamberlain Papers, letter to Lord Woolton, 6th Sept., NC7/11/32.

³Chamberlain letter to sisters, 1st Oct., NC 18/1/1123.

⁴Hankey memorandum, 29th Sept., HNKY 11/2.

⁵Prem 1/443. Chamberlain to Lord Noel-Buxton., 28th Sept.

⁶Dawson Diary, 3rd Oct., Mss Dawson 43.

⁷Chamberlain letters to sisters, 23rd Sept., NC 18/1/1122.

⁸FO 800/317, H/XV/277. Halifax to Bishop Carey.

⁹Hankey, 29th Sept., HNKY 11/2, the memorandum contains a detailed discussion of this, suggesting that

In considering the Government's attitudes towards peace negotiations and attempts to initiate such negotiations, it must be borne in mind that they had to take into account those sections of the British populace who favoured an early settlement. Therefore, a brief description of the views of those who opposed a rejection of attempts at peace will be made. Because this is by rights a separate topic from that of this thesis, and deserves much fuller treatment than it will be given here, the following comments will focus upon the speech of Lloyd George in the House of Commons on 3 October, which acted as both a stimulant and a point of unity for those who supported an attempt to negotiate.

As has already been noted, there was a widespread belief that Hitler would put forward some sort of peace offer, and many feared, along with Harold Nicolson, that "there will be strong pressure to accept it".¹ Others, however, feared lest the olive branch be rejected too firmly, and thus the chance of peace be lost. On 2 October, A.J. Sylvester, Lloyd George's long-time assistant, wrote to his "chief" that such people represented a "Movement ... something like the Lansdowne Movement in the Great War that you had to deal with".² To describe those advocating peace at this time as a "movement" is to exaggerate the degree of cohesion between them, although there was widespread agreement among them with the writings of Richard Stokes, the Labour MP for Ipswich. In a memorandum of 3 October, Stokes summed up many of the arguments of those who thought like him: "Does anybody believe we can force both Germany and Russia to give up a bit of the country they have divided between them? The only possible way is negotiation".³

...in this situation, with the Germans offering to withdraw from occupied territory or place a proportion of their air force in "the temporary custody of neutrals", the Allies ought to reply in kind. Nevertheless, it is concluded "But it is extremely unlikely that we shall on the present occasion receive a peace offer that justifies treatment of this kind".

¹Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 8th Sept.

²Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 24, Sylvester's Daily Notes, 2nd Oct.

³Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 19, "What are we fighting for?", 3rd Oct.

What transformed this feeling among a very small group of people that it would be worth trying to reach a settlement to the war into something which very briefly had both focus and cohesion was Lloyd George's 3 October speech. Until then, public interest in the possibility of peace had remained largely inarticulate, but afterwards there was a flood of correspondence as the victor of the Great War became the rallying point for those who wished to prevent that sort of war being repeated. Lloyd George began by stating that if the "question of peace were dependent upon the word of Herr Hitler I am afraid that we should have no alternative but to proceed until we get some other and better and more assured guarantee", and that a Russo-German fait accompli in Poland would be unacceptable. However, he continued, by maintaining that it was possible that an offer "which goes far beyond that" would be forthcoming. That "if, for example, there is a document which comes from the Italian Government or the Russian Government", then the Cabinet ought to "pause" and not reach too hurried a conclusion. Then, in the central and most controversial paragraph of the speech, he urged:

"Let us consider what we are doing. We are entering upon something which involves the whole life of this Empire and the whole future of our people. What I want to ask the Prime Minister is this: Suppose we get a document of that kind (from Italy or Russia), it makes a difference in two respects".

These differences being firstly that it would be from neutral Governments, and secondly that those Governments would be just as concerned with the implementation of any agreement as Britain, thus "they will not be dependent merely on the word of one Government. You will have the signatures of at least two more". Lloyd George was not seeking for a merely superficial settlement, but one which came from proposals that

were "specific, detailed, broad, which excluded nothing but reviewed all the subjects that have been the cause of all the trouble of the last few years". This, he claimed, could be achieved via a conference between Britain, France, Germany (without Hitler's replacement) and the leading neutrals. Such a conference would be designed to give a lasting settlement, not a "mere patched up peace" which "would not be of the slightest use, because you would have to begin again".¹

Although Lloyd George's speech was attacked in the House of Commons by Duff Cooper, and privately criticised by such as Leo Amery as "a most unfortunate speech",² The Times reported that this criticism was "not so much for its content as for what members regarded as its untimeliness and the opportunities it offered ... for distortion".³ As far as Lloyd George was concerned, the timing of the speech was crucial to what he hoped to achieve. This was to put pressure on the Government not to remove all possibility of a negotiated settlement, and there were many who were thankful for this attempt. The then Conservative back-bencher Robert Boothby sent congratulations to Lloyd George, but added that "I don't think the British Democracy, in one of its most violent fits of morality, would accept such a move (a World Conference), however well designed it might be from a purely realistic point of view".⁴ Sir Charles Cayzer MP was another Conservative who wrote to say that he felt that Lloyd George's was "the voice of sanity and reason".⁵ In addition, there were many others within Parliament who either agreed with

¹Lloyd George Papers, 3rd Oct., LG/G/29/25/5.

²Amery Diary, 3rd Oct.

³The Times, 4th Oct., had a long report on "Mr Lloyd George on Peace Terms".

⁴Lloyd George Papers, Boothby to Lloyd George, n.d. but, early Oct. On Sept 29th he had written to Lloyd George that "I feel very strongly that we are in no position to reject a peace conference out of hand", and that "You are I believe, the only man in this country who can state the alternatives plainly to the nation during the next few days, and I do hope you will not hesitate to do so". Yet in the October letter Boothby also wrote in opposition to many of Lloyd George's other supporters, that he was "worried by the rising tide of pacifism", LG/G/Box 3.

⁵Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/56, 4th Oct., Cayzer to Lloyd George.

the former Liberal leader or at least could not "see in any of these points the defeatism read into them by the critics of the speech".¹ These opinions were faithfully reported by A.J. Sylvester, who noted on 4 October that he had been informed that over thirty Labour MP's agreed with Lloyd George and that there was going to be "a Labour Candidates and Members meeting at the weekend when the present attitude of the Labour Party is to be challenged". The following day he wrote of a Labour Party Meeting held that morning, with Attlee in the Chair, which agreed "that they would consider any Peace Proposal".² If these minutes are to be trusted, and it must be added that there is no other evidence of this meeting, then it shows that there was a considerable body of Parliamentary opinion which was concerned that any real opportunity for obtaining a secure negotiated peace should not be missed. These people did not really want peace-at-any-price, as they realised as clearly as the Government did that the European situation had become impossibly unstable. Where they differed from the Cabinet was that the Lloyd George supporters refused to accept either that war must be fought to the "bitter end" or that Germany needed teaching a lesson. A secure settlement for them was neither impossible nor a matter for the future alone, it was a present possibility - maybe a remote possibility - but one which existed nonetheless.³ The main reason for grasping this opportunity was the huge human, material and financial cost that would be required to defeat Germany, which was felt to be out of all proportion

¹*Manchester Guardian*, 5th Oct, letter from Eleanor Rathbone MP.

²*Lloyd George Papers*, LG/G/Box 24, 4th Oct., Sylvester's Daily Notes.

³*Lloyd George Papers*, LG/G/Box 15 & 58, Lloyd George also received encouragement from members of the House of Lords. Lord Mottisone wrote on 6th Oct. that many Peers agreed with his words, and on 4th Oct., Lord Brockett wrote "It may interest you to know that there are 15 to 20 Peers and MP's friendly to the Government, who have been working quietly to try and persuade the Government that a "secure" peace now with safeguards for disarmament even though all the objects of "smashing Hitlerism" and "winning back Poland" are not attained, would be better for this country, the Empire and the world in general than an indefinite and appalling war".

to the political advantages of such a defeat. In addition many even maintained that to defeat Hitler or Germany would instead create a repeat of the post-Versailles difficulties. For such people attempts at negotiating were not just desirable, but essential. Yet even for these, such as Lord Brockett, there was little naive belief in Hitler's trustworthiness. Instead, they felt that despite this fact, it ought to be possible, before or during a conference, to so construct the terms of an agreement that Hitler would be bound not so much by his own word but by German self-interest, a far more compelling force. The nature of such binding clauses provoked argument in favour of disarmament, thus removing Germany's - as well as her potential enemies' - ability to fight a modern war, international economic co-operation to reduce a perceived cause of war itself, or a system of mutual guaranteeing of the agreed terms whereby any one aggressor automatically became the enemy of the guaranteeing powers. Although the most frequently suggested combination of guaranteeing powers was, in addition to Britain, France and Germany, the leading neutrals Italy, USA and the Soviet Union (as in Lloyd George's 3 October speech) the advocates of such a solution rarely spared the time to consider the practicalities of their plans, or if they did, they conveniently ignored the counter evidence of the post-1918 attempts at such agreement.

Lloyd George's 3 October speech and his follow-up article in the Sunday Express on the 8th were designed to put pressure upon the Government¹ as it faced the prospect of responding to a German peace move. In the words of a summary of Lloyd George's position produced by a member of his staff:

"The question therefore which Mr Chamberlain and M. Daladier have to decide on behalf of the people of Great Britain and France is whether it would be better to have a conference

¹Another person who was attempting to influence the government was the US Ambassador Joseph Kennedy; see Koskoff, pp 211-219.

of belligerent and neutral powers before the great slaughter and destruction on the Franco-German frontier begins or after".¹

This was indeed the question facing the Government, and it was one taken up by significant numbers of the general public. Had Victor Gollancz's offer² to publish Lloyd George's statements in favour of a negotiated peace been accepted, this support could have been much greater. Lloyd George's 3 October speech resulted in a flood of letters in support, of which two, from the total of 2700 received in October alone,³ will serve as examples. "All those who are unwilling to see the nations of Europe emulate the Gadarene swine feel grateful to you for your speech made yesterday in the House of Commons" was the point expressed in one letter, while another simply stated "Thank God there is still a statesman left in England".⁴ Lloyd George's letters on the subject of peace were over twenty times more numerous than those on all other subjects combined. On 8 October Chamberlain noted that in three days the previous week "I had 2450 letters and 1860 of them were stop the war in one form or another",⁵ whereas on 23 September he had written that "last week 17% of my correspondence was on the theme of "stop the war"". ⁶ Further evidence, although one would not like to put too great an emphasis on it, for the strength of public support for the line taken by Lloyd George comes from a British Institute of Public Opinion survey. This asked; "Would you

¹Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/201-2, "Questions for the Government and Parliament raised by Hitler's Peace Offer and Mr Lloyd George's Comment ...", Oct. 1939. Chamberlain would have agreed that the choice was between a conference soon or a conference later.

²Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/48, 31st Oct. Gollancz congratulated Lloyd George on his speech and later offered to publish a pamphlet of his comments, but by then the impetus of the moment had petered out.

³Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Boxes 50-60.

⁴Lloyd George Papers. General Correspondence. Many of the letters received were from small groups or in the form of petitions.

⁵Chamberlain letter to sisters, 8th Oct. He added, "I have little doubt that Lloyd George was encouraged by his correspondence to think that he would get a lot of support for a move that (he hoped) might damage the Government ..." NC 18/1/1124.

⁶Chamberlain letter to sisters, 23rd Sept., NC 18/1/1122.

approve or disapprove if the British Government were to discuss peace proposals with Germany now?", to which 17% said they would approve and 77% said they would disapprove.¹ Although quantification of the extent of support for an attempt to reach a negotiated settlement is impossible, it would clearly be wrong to dismiss it altogether. There was never a threat to the Government itself, but as Chamberlain's letters show, he was very aware that such anti-war opinion existed and concerned lest it grew into such a threat. When considering a reply to any peace offer, the influence of the ideas of such as Lloyd George meant that any statement had to bear this factor in mind along with the possibly more obvious external ones.²

During the first month of the war, the members of the Cabinet had occasion to consider how to respond to a wide variety of hints from abroad about peace. The sheer number of these, and the persistence of two of them, ensured that the development of the Government's ideas about how to treat peace feelers, before Hitler's 6 October speech which in many ways represented their climax, took place in a somewhat haphazard fashion. Despite this, however, it is clearly possible to see a consistent development of thought as to how various moves should be treated.

The first occasion of discussion over how to respond to pressure for peace was the speech by Hitler at Danzig on 19 September. It had been expected that he would "attempt to put forward an attractive peace proposal".³ When this proved not to be the case, Lord Halifax concluded that the "intervention of Russia" had probably prevented it. Soon after this, however, the Soviet Union began to be seen as one of the main agents pressing for an early peace. The same day as Hitler's Danzig speech, Halifax discussed with Geoffrey Dawson, editor of The Times, "the appropriate reply to a "peace offer" from these combined bandits"⁴ Hitler and

¹BLPES, Gerald Barry Papers, file 9, 8th March 1940. I have not been able to ascertain either the exact date of this poll, other than October 1939, or the size and nature of the sample.

²A fuller treatment of Lloyd George's attitude is given by Paul Addison in his essay 'Lloyd George and Compromise Peace in the Second World War' in Lloyd George: twelve essays. Edited by A.J.P. Taylor. *op.cit.*

³Cab 66/1, WP (39) 39, 19th Sept. Note on Hitler's Danzig Speech.

⁴Dawson Diary, 19th Sept., Mss Dawson 43.

Stalin". As the possibilities of such a "peace offer" increased, especially with Ribbentrop's visit to Moscow, and although on 29 September the Minister of Transport, Euan Wallace, described "the Russo-German "Peace" threat" as the "big news of the day",¹ there was very little Government concern as to the danger of such a "threat". The reason for this was the low regard the Soviet's alliance with Germany had caused the former to be held in, not only in Britain but in most neutral countries, which undercut any credibility Stalin could have had as a peacemaker. Yet if Soviet "good offices" were worthless, they could still use threats - particularly of further intervention - to try to influence allied Governments.² Such a threat was, however, fatally weakened by the Government's generally low estimation of Russian power.

A country whose diplomatic and military importance was held in higher regard was Italy, and as early as 10 September Churchill felt it necessary to urge that Ciano be made to understand Britain's "inflexible purpose" so that he "will be less likely to toy with the idea of an Italian mediation coupled with veiled menaces of intervention against us".³ Although it had almost become the expected norm that Mussolini would play "the peace card for Hitler",⁴ unlike the case of the Soviet Union the reality of her "veiled menaces of intervention" meant that the Government could not treat her with dismissive contempt. Although in private Samuel Hoare, the Lord Privy Seal, could write that there "can be no question of our rising to Mussolini's peace fly",⁵ the public response had to be worded somewhat differently. Harold Nicolson noticed this when on 24 September he wrote that there "is a note of appeasement in regard to Mussolini's suggested mediation which makes me sick. They say that we

¹Wallace Diary, 29th Sept.,

Mss Eng Hist. c 495.

²Cab 21/952, 30th Sept. Telegram from Ambassador in Bucharest.

³Gilbert, p.22, 10th Sept. Churchill to Halifax.

⁴Sunday Express, 24th Sept.

⁵Templewood Papers, Hoare to Lothian, 25th Sept., Vol.XI.

are "deeply appreciative" of his point of view".¹ This difference in reaction between Hoare's comment and the "deeply appreciative" tone of the official reply should not be interpreted merely as that between the private resolve and the public propaganda. Instead the seemingly uncompromising attitude was again not so much a refusal to consider any negotiation at all but that "such [a] suggestion is totally impracticable"² at that time.

Although the Government declined to show any interest in Italian peace moves, rumours of Mussolini's continued working for an agreement persisted until October.³ These provided some of the background for Hitler's October speech, but, least as far as the British Government was concerned, a far more important framework was given by the Swede Birger Dahlerus, as referred to earlier. Dahlerus, whose credentials as a mediator depended upon his friendship with Goering, had first attempted to act in this role before war broke out. It was not until 18 September that he contacted the Foreign Office again⁴ and the reply then given indicates the position which the Government found themselves in. They could "conceive of no peace offer which the German Government are likely in the present circumstances to make that could be even considered by HMG or the French Government". This accurately reflected their position, but so too did the paragraph which followed. "But it is not possible to define the attitude which HMG might adopt to an offer of which they cannot know the nature and if Mr Dahlerus were willing to ascertain from Field Marshall Goering the nature of the offer contemplated to us ... HMG would be able to examine it and state definitely their attitude".⁵ Contacts

¹*Nicolson Diary, 24th Sept., Typescript. What the Government were "deeply appreciative" of was of course Mussolini's neutrality, and would not risk a change in this status.*

²*Templewood Papers, Hoare to Lothian, 25th Sept., Vol. XI.*

³*BBC(WAC), BBC News, 1st Oct., of Ciano's trip to Germany.*

⁴*See summary of Principal Peace Feelers, Sept. 1939 to March 1941, FO 371/26542, c4216. Dahlerus had, however, contacted the British Minister in Stockholm on 5th Sept.*

⁵*FO 800/317, H/XV/287, 19th Sept.*

with intermediaries were thus regarded as useful not from the point of view of any early peace or in order to facilitate preliminary discussion of known terms, but rather because they could help to establish whether and when the Germans were prepared to seek peace on acceptable terms and guarantees. With this in mind the Foreign Office attempted to discover exactly how useful Dahlerus could be, while at the same time seeking to appear to underline the German perception of British resolve. This latter point was emphasised when the British Minister in Oslo requested "guidance as to what to say or rather what not to say"¹ to Dahlerus. To this request the guidance given was a phrase from Chamberlain on 20 September that Britain's purpose was "to redeem Europe from the perpetually recurring fear of German aggression and enable the peoples of Europe to preserve their independence and their liberties".² Although this was nothing new, it meant that the message being communicated to Berlin did not necessarily include the removal of Hitler; a message which had every chance of being heard there.

On 28 September Dahlerus visited London, but although Sir Henry Channon's diary reveals a certain amount of excitement about this,³ Cadogan's shows in fact how little significance was attributed to his efforts. He was "like a wasp at a picnic - one can't beat him off".⁴ However, despite this disparaging assessment Dahlerus had a meeting the following day with Chamberlain, Halifax and Cadogan. Although "it didn't get us much further" the British position was defined, by the Prime Minister, as "No assurances, no promises, no signatures of the present regime are worth anything. Germany must do some deed as evidence of good faith".⁵

¹FO 800/317, H/XV/289, 22nd Sept.

²FO 800/317, H/XV/290, 23rd Sept.

³Channon Diary, 28th Sept.

⁴Cadogan Diary, 28th Sept., ACAD 1/8.

⁵Cadogan Diary, 29th Sept., ACAD 1/8.; Harvey wrote that Dahlerus proposed "apparently peace and disarmament on the basis of an independent CS [Czechoslovakia] and Poland. But yet today in Moscow Rib and Stalin have agreed to partition Poland finally". Which emphasises the confused - and confusing - signals coming from Germany at this time. Harvey Diary, 29th Sept., Add Mss 56395.

But still no real progress was made.¹ Although the Government was willing to talk around the idea of negotiating a peace supported by some concrete evidence of good faith, it was not until Cadogan's second talk with Dahlerus that some practical proposal was put forward. This was that "If it was impossible to accept the word of the German Government, would it be possible to accept the word of the German people expressed by a plebiscite?" Although Cadogan replied that "the Gov't could not give its opinion on this immediately", Dahlerus was asked to raise the question in Berlin. If the reaction was not immediately unfavourable, then he was "to find out what kind of question they would be prepared to put in the plebiscite and if they were able to let us know what they were prepared to do in this direction". After the answer to these questions was known, then Cadogan was sure that "HMG would be ready to consider that and decide whether such a procedure would afford any prospect of reaching an agreement".² Although Dahlerus's suggestion of a plebiscite was not rejected by Cadogan, it would be wrong to suppose that this was thought of as the solution of the intractable question of obtaining some sort of guarantee. Chamberlain's letter to his sisters on 1 October still concluded that "there is no reasonable prospect of a peace such as we would accept", because Hitler was "not prepared to pay the price".³ The idea of a plebiscite was not rejected but neither did it change anything. As late as 4 October Cadogan could still sum up the message taken back by Dahlerus as; "all of this, or some of it, may be very nice but we can't trust the word or the assurance or the signature of the present ruler of Germany". And it is hard not to detect a note of sarcasm in his comment about Dahlerus's "brainwave about a plebiscite".⁴

The German reaction to Dahlerus's plebiscite idea was never known

¹*Cadogan Diary, 30th Sept. He writes that Dahlerus was "wasting my time yesterday". ACAD 1/8.*

²*FO 800/317, H/XV/299, 30th Sept. Cadogan's record of his second interview with Dahlerus.*

³*Chamberlain letter to sisters, 1st Oct. NC 18/1/1123.*

⁴*FO 800/317, H/XV/306, 4th Oct. Notes of talk with Dahlerus by Cadogan.*

in London. On 3 October, he reported that "exhaustive discussions especially concerning questions of guarantees" had taken place and some "New proposals" presented.¹ In reply to his request to come to London, however, Cadogan merely repeated that the British case had already been made clear, and that Dahlerus must decide whether significant advance had taken place. If so, "arrangements will certainly be made to see him at any time convenient".² In the event Dahlerus did not come.³

Lord Halifax found it "impossible to decide at that stage what importance, if any, should be attached to these communications" with Dahlerus. However, while it was felt better to leave all initiative to the German side, a recurrent theme of the period, the Foreign Secretary was sure that it would be wrong to "absolutely shut the door".⁴ Dahlerus was being kept "in play",⁵ a policy Halifax justified to the French Ambassador Corbin in terms of providing a useful avenue of information and of driving "something of a wedge between Herr Hitler and Field-Marshal Goering".⁶

Although Dahlerus again asked to come to London to discuss further "comments and bearings" which would not be in Hitler's forthcoming speech,⁷ this was not seen as worthwhile. Indeed, it was noted that "his movements are causing suspicion in certain quarters".⁸ These "quarters" as Halifax explained later in the day to the War Cabinet were mainly the French Government, who had been caused "some uneasiness".⁹ Dahlerus's moves, regarded as a useful source of information in the run-up to Hitler's "peace offer", were later judged very much in accordance with

¹FO 800/317, H/XV/302, 3rd Oct. *All this communication was via the British Ambassador in the Hague.*

²FO 800/317, H/XV/303, 3rd Oct.

³FO 800/317, H/XV/307, 5th Oct.

⁴Cab 65/3, WM (39) 38, 5th Oct., *Halifax's comment to Cabinet.*

⁵Harvey Diary, 5th Oct., *Add Mss 56395.*

⁶FO 800/317, H/XV/308, 5th Oct.

⁷FO 800/317, H/XV/309, 6th Oct. *Telegram from the Hague.*

⁸FO 800/317, H/XV/310, 6th Oct. *Telegram to the Hague.*

⁹Cab 65/3, WM (39) 39, 6th Oct.

the unsatisfactory nature of that offer and thus played down unfairly in retrospect.

The other major efforts to persuade the British Government to consider a peace conference were by the former Chancellor von Papen, at that time Ambassador to Ankara. In his Memoirs he writes; "I thought it my first duty, when peace feelers were being put out after the end of the Polish campaign, to prevent as far as possible the division of Europe into two hostile camps".¹ This took place through a series of meetings between von Papen and The Netherlands Minister in Ankara, who then reported his discussion to the British Ambassador, Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hugessen. Although the British Ambassador was warned that "Herr von Papen was not unreliable" he was also "authorised to gather what information he could from that source".² Von Papen's reputation as "a light-weight" and "as most hysterical and unreliable" did not make British ministers eager to have anything to do with him. Yet at the same time the belief that he was "an extremely clever intriguer"³ made contact most interesting. On 2 October, von Papen's ideas for peace were read out to the Cabinet. In brief, these comprised an "independent state" covering most of German-occupied Poland, "autonomy" for Czechoslovakia, European disarmament and colonial settlement, an economic conference, and the "abdication of Herr Hitler"; these facts being proffered by Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hugessen "for what it is worth"⁴ as information only. Soon after this a further telegram from the same source was received. This was broadly similar to the first, but "made no reference to the abdication of Herr Hitler". There is no great discussion of either message recorded in the Cabinet Minutes, apart from Halifax's comment that the second was "less favourable". Indeed, up to this point,

¹ *Von Papen Memoirs* translated by Brian Connell. London: Andre Deutsch 1952. p.455. Subsequently: *Von Papen Memoirs*.

² Cab 65/3, WM (39) 34, 2nd Oct.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* The telegram from Turkey, No.541, was read to Cabinet but not discussed as it was received only after the discussion of the topic had ended.

rather than considering von Papen's ideas significant enough to examine seriously, the Cabinet was merely being informed of what was going on.¹ Also, von Papen was not only approaching the British Cabinet. On 4 October it was reported that he had been "actively canvassing representation of neutral states as well as Turkish official circles, in favour of the forthcoming German peace offensive";² the following day he reportedly "begged Turkey to use her influence to induce the Western Powers to agree to peace discussions", holding out the prospect of a "Czechoslovak state and a Poland of 14,000,000 people".³

It was only after two further telegrams on 5 October that Cabinet discussed the von Papen messages in any detail and only then in conjunction with a report of Dahlerus's activities.⁴ The Cabinet's conclusion about both of them was the same. They would hold resolutely to their declared position while at the same time not shutting the door on any genuine peace attempt. Only time would determine whether there was anything of substance or not. As Oliver Harvey noted in his diary, "We are keeping both sources in play to see what they may produce, but otherwise there is no intention of contemplating a patched up peace with Hitler".⁵

These approaches by Dahlerus and von Papen were viewed with interest, but no more, as the expected peace attempt by Hitler was awaited. The same was true of all other reports of peace moves,⁶ such as the Soviet-

¹Cab 65/3, 5th Oct. Telegram, No.553, from Ankara. WM (39) 38.

²Cab 21/952, 4th Oct. Telegram, No.258, from Greece.

³Cab 21/952, 5th Oct. Telegram from Anakara, No.251. This was repeated the following day via Athens, emphasising that "Hitler was prepared to retire into private life".

⁴Cab 65/3, WM (39) 38.

⁵Harvey Diary, 5th Oct. Add Mss 56395. For the Cabinet in the previous note, the real interest centred around Goering's involvement. Harvey thought Goering was behind von Papen. Samuel Hoare thought it "well to damp down a little our anti-Goering propaganda", while despite reservations Churchill "agreed that Goering might well cherish the idea of playing the role of General Monck". See previous note.

⁶For example Cab 21/952, 6th Oct., when the Ambassador to Greece reported that he had been told that Hitler's speech will "constitute a supreme effort for peace ..."

German declaration on the future of Poland. The final statement on the subject before Hitler spoke, however, belonged to the Prime Minister, in a report of the events which had occurred during the previous week. After discussing the joint German-Soviet declaration that they had finally settled the question arising from "the collapse of Poland", and the economic agreement between the same new allies, Chamberlain concluded that "nothing in what has happened ... should lead this country to modify the attitude which it has felt right to take".¹ The Russo-German announcement was seen as "a suggestion of some proposal for peace" coupled with "a scarcely veiled threat as to the consequences if the proposal should be refused".² Even if the threat were real, it would not lead to any change in the Allied position³ which Chamberlain described in the following way:

"And I would add one thing more. No mere assurances from the present German Government could be accepted by us. For that Government have far too often proved in the past that their undertakings are worthless when it suits them that they should be broken. If, therefore, proposals are made, we shall certainly examine them, and we shall test them in the light of what I have just said. Nobody desires the war to continue for an unnecessary day, but the overwhelming mass of opinion in this country, and I am satisfied also in France, is determined to secure that the rule of violence shall cease, and that the word of Governments, once pledged, must henceforth be kept".⁴

¹Hansard, Vol.351, Col.1855, 3rd Oct.

²Ibid Note 1, Col.1856.

³As noted previously, Russian action in the first month of the war tended to confirm rather than alter peoples' previously held opinions of the war.

⁴Hansard, Vol.351, Cols.1856-7, 3rd Oct.

CHAPTER 3

HITLER'S PEACE OFFER, 6th OCTOBER 1939

In the words of the Marquis of Zetland, Secretary of State for India, the effect of Lloyd George's 3 October speech was "to canalise the debate along the lines of the attitude to be adopted by this country to the expected German peace offensive".¹ For the next two days the main item on the BBC news was "the progress of the "peace offensive"",² until, as expected, Hitler delivered his long-awaited speech at the Reichstag on 6 October. This speech was immediately translated by the Reuters news agency and telegraphed to the Foreign Office in London. The BBC decided "to break programmes at 1.40 p.m. October 6 or in intervals between schools broadcasts for a summary of Herr Hitler's Reichstag speech".³ The first of these summaries was in fact broadcast at 2.15 p.m. and took the form of a précis of about 700 words of the speech itself,⁴ with no additional comment, despite the concern of the Lord Privy Seal lest the British public "might well be bewildered" by "any specious offer".⁵ At 4 p.m. there was a shorter summary, which was described, in Hitler's own words, as the German Chancellor's "view of the present situation and also of the future".⁶ It was not termed a peace offer, or a peace 'offensive', but simply as Hitler's "speech". The reason for this surprising lack of comment, official or otherwise, alongside the extracts from Hitler's

India Office Library, Mss Eur D 609/11, 9 th Oct.

¹ *All references are to 1939 unless otherwise stated.*

² *BBC(WAC) Reel 14, 4th Oct., 7.00 a.m.*

³ *BBC(WAC) R3/16/1. 6th Oct. The ministerial involvement in this decision is impossible to assess.*

⁴ *BBC(WAC) Reel 14, 6th Oct., 2.15 p.m.*

⁵ *Cab 65/1, WM (39) 39, 6th Oct.; Euan Wallace, Minister of Transport, records the Cabinet discussion of how Hitler's speech should be covered in the following way; "We were all astonished to discover that the Minister of Information had no precise idea as to what (if any) arrangements had been made to deal effectively on the tape in the evening papers and through the BBC with the speech Hitler is to make in the Reichstag in less than an hour's time", Mss Eng Hist c495.*

⁶ *BBC (WAC) Reel 14, 6th Oct., 2.15 pm.*

text, was that the Foreign Secretary was adamant that "nothing must be issued in an official statement until he and the Cabinet have had a chance of thinking about it".¹

The following day, Ivone Kirkpatrick of the Central Department of the Foreign Office produced a summary of Hitler's speech which was used in formulating the Government's response.² The first part of the speech, Kirkpatrick wrote, was a survey of recent European history which was "full of the usual misrepresentations of fact; and it would serve no useful purpose to go into these in detail". After this "historical" survey, Hitler outlined what he saw as the "two questions [that] are at issue". These were as Kirkpatrick summarised it "1) The regulation of the problems arising from the dismemberment of Poland; and 2) the problem of dealing with these international anxieties which make the political and economic life of nations so difficult". At least in their analysis of the problems there was agreement between Berlin and London, but it was soon clear that the same could not be said for the proposed answers to these problems.

In discussing the nature of the solutions to the problems he had raised, Hitler firstly asserted that the future of Poland was a purely Russo-German affair: east of the line of demarcation was Russia's, while west of it he proposed to "regulate the whole living space according to nationalities", and create a German protectorate over Poland, similar to that already in existence over Czechoslovakia. Hitler's concluding comment on the fate of Poland being:

"If Europe wants calm and peace then the European states ought to be grateful that Germany and Russia are prepared to transform this arena of disturbance into a zone of

¹BBC(WAC) R28/122/1, 6th Oct.

²Prem 1/395, 7th Oct.

peaceful development. For the German Government such a task will mean that Germany will have her hands full for the coming 50 years".¹

Hitler continued by saying "The second task which I believe is by far the most important, should lead to the establishment not only of the feeling, but also of the certainty of European security". With this last statement again there could be no disagreement in Whitehall. However, in describing what he meant by "the certainty of European security" Hitler stated:

"... we consider the Versailles Treaty extinct, and that the German Government and with it the entire German nation see no reason and no cause for any further revision except for the demand for such colonial possessions as are due to the Reich and correspond to it".

The Allied leaders had the right to be sceptical about these sentiments as this was not the first time Hitler had seen "no cause for any further revision" of the European borders. Ivone Kirkpatrick summarised the German aims in the following way:

- "1) Germany demands the return of all her colonies; but not in the form of an ultimatum backed by force;
- 2) a new ordering of markets and a definite regulation of currencies thus removing step by step the obstacles to free trade;
- 3) The creation of an absolutely guaranteed peace and a feeling of security among all peoples;

This last proposal he proceeds to elaborate by saying that it

¹ Prem 1/395, Reuter's copy of Hitler's speech. 6th Oct.

will be necessary to reduce armaments to a reasonable and economically tolerable extent and to define the applicability and the use of certain modern weapons; also to define the use of gas, submarines and the nature of contraband".

Hitler proposed that as it was "impossible for ... a conference to meet" without "fundamental preparations to clear up isolated points" and "under the pressure of mobilised armies", therefore the war must be brought to "an end". In order to achieve such a suspension of hostilities, the German Chancellor suggested the following terms: Poland to be divided between Germany and Russia; Czechoslovakia to retain her post-March 1939 frontiers; after a recognition of the above, Germany will receive back all the colonies, the questions of reductions of armaments and of humane warfare will be discussed, as will trade and currency policies. After such preparatory work as proves necessary, a conference would take place. Nevertheless, before concluding his speech, Hitler could not resist taking a swipe at one of his main enemies. "It is probable" he said "that these remarks of mine will be regarded by Churchill and his friends merely as weakness or cowardice. I need not trouble myself with their opinion. I only make this declaration because I very naturally desire to spare my people suffering. But should the views of Messrs Churchill and his following prevail, then this declaration will be my last. We should then fight".

Even so, after the above rather clumsy attempt to isolate the most bellicose faction in the British Government, Hitler concluded his speech with a final extension of the olive branch:

"Let those repulse my hand who regard war as the better solution. As leader of the German people and Chancellor

of the Reich, I can only thank God at this moment that He has so marvellously and wonderfully blessed us in our first hard struggle for our right and I pray to Him that He will guide us and all others on the right path along which not only the German people, but the whole of Europe will find a new happiness and peace".

Although this was the way Hitler concluded, Ivone Kirkpatrick's estimation about what was actually offered was somewhat different:

"Thus Germany is to get all she wants in Europe at once, whilst we have to be content ourselves with promises of no more aggression and with vague hopes of armament limitation and the abandonment of autarchy in Germany. To get the latter we should presumably be required in due course to make substantial economic concessions, whilst we should in any event have to return all the former German colonies".

The conclusions reached in the first Government comment on Hitler's speech - in a circular telegram to the Dominions the same evening - were broadly similar to Kirkpatrick's. It read; "The second half of the speech contains what Hitler describes as a few more proposals for peace. In their present form these proposals are in many respects vague and obscure, but it is noted that they contain no suggestion of reparation for the wrongs done by Germany to other peoples".¹

This then was the speech, or 'offer' or 'offensive', that had been so long anticipated. It talked about peace, it talked about lasting security, but it was overall an attempt to consolidate the gains

¹Cab 21/952, folios 225-6, 6th Oct. Circular Telegram to Dominions.

Germany had made while again promising that the future would be peaceful if only these gains were agreed to. Hitler had not offered reparation for the attack on Poland, but it was not so much reparation that the British leaders were looking for, as guarantees of security. The Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister were far more concerned with preventing "next time" than in putting right the wrongs committed by this last act of aggression; and if they considered Hitler's speech did offer the prospect of a secure and peaceful future, then the door of negotiation would be open.

The private reactions to Hitler's speech were surprisingly varied for a country which was at war because it had not offered to rectify any of the specific issues which led to war, especially in regard to Poland (although the Government had never committed itself to anything more than the restoration of a Polish State). Despite this, the interpretation put forward by Press and Radio was initially unanimous. As far as the BBC was concerned, whose coverage was directed by the Ministry of Information, as noted earlier, the main emphasis was on the reaction given in newspapers, particularly US and Dominion ones.¹ The reasons for this being the lack of official British comment and the desire to give foreign credibility to its generally unfavourable tone.² The Times noted that "Hitler's "peace proposals"" were "unhopeful", and in reality "Terms of no peace".³ This was a close reflection of the line taken by Chamberlain, which should not be surprising as The Times' editor, Geoffrey Dawson, had been invited to Downing Street on the evening of 6 October where "the PM ... gave me his general ideas" on "Hitler's much heralded speech".⁴ Nevertheless, other papers expressed

¹BBC(WAC), *News Bulletins*, Reel 14, 7th Oct.

²For example, see review of the *Canadian Press*, FO 800/310, H/IX/135, 7th Oct., "substance of comment throughout has been impossibility of trusting Hitler ..."

³The Times, 9th Oct. Main news page and leader article heading.

⁴Dawson Diary, Mss Dawson 43, 6th Oct. Although The Times did allow its letter page to contain suggestions of which the Government would not have approved, such as an appeal for the convening of "an Assembly...

similar attitudes. The Evening Standard's comment was "Hitler's speech changes nothing. If in the old political pottage on which the peoples of Europe have been fed for six years, now rehashed with a not too elegant ladle ..." ¹ The Daily Telegraph described the proposals as "vague and obscure", as "Hitler's Confidence Trick", yet still gave the speech 105 column-inches of quotation, about six thousand words. ² No speech of Hitler's would again receive such coverage, and this is a reflection of the hardening of attitude which only later occurred towards the idea of peace.

There were many whose private reactions expressed a position of no compromise similar to the newspapers. Pownall wrote that Hitler's peace offer "is not likely to cut any ice in France, GB or anywhere else". ³ Leo Amery concurred, noting "Hitler's speech was in the evening papers. I don't think even our worst defeatists can make much of his so-called peace offer ..." The following day his opinion had not changed; "Hitler's speech came in and was practically the same as his speeches after every other act of violence. I cannot imagine anyone taking it as a serious peace offer". ⁴ Labour MP Hugh Dalton found himself in the previously rare position of agreeing with Amery. In a speech at the Clackmannan by-election on 9 October Dalton said: "But no-one believes Hitler's promises any more. We want peaceful deeds, not worthless words from him now. Would he be willing, as a first step to a Peace Conference, to bring all his troops and his Secret Police out of Warsaw and Prague, and restore their freedom to the Poles and Czechs whom he has enslaved?" ⁵

of the League of Nations" or "a more ecumenical council", from A.F. Pollard, Director of the Institute of Historical Research, London University. See Letters page, 12th Oct.

¹*Evening Standard*, 6th Oct. Three days later its leader headline was "Molech wants peace".

²*Daily Telegraph*, 7th Oct.

³*Pownall Diary*, 12th Oct.

⁴*Amery Diary*, 6th & 7th Oct.

⁵*Dalton Papers, Part II (A) 6/2, speech at Clackmannan by-election, 9th Oct.*

Dalton and Amery, from their opposite ends of the political spectrum, were clear that Hitler's speech offered no prospect or opportunity for peace. If this eminently sensible conclusion was finally reached by the Government, then indeed there was no chance of peace. Yet what Dalton also called for was acts, not words, to introduce negotiations, and even this revealed that peace with Hitler was not yet impossible. "We want peaceful deeds ... from him", Dalton said. Thus a settlement without a change of regime was not inconceivable to some who dismissed Hitler's speech outright. Were the Government to take this position as well, then the reply to Hitler needed to be couched in very careful terms; to reject what was offered but not yet reject finally the one offering it.

Although Sir Alec Cadogan wrote in his diary of "Hitler's ridiculous speech",¹ the first public indication of the Government's attitude was in the 8 a.m. news of 7 October on the BBC. It was here announced that: "The British Government's considered view of Hitler's proposals is expected to be announced by the Prime Minister next week. The Government has already said that the proposals will be carefully examined. It has pointed out, however, that no Peace Proposals are likely to be acceptable which do not effectively free Europe from the menace of aggression".² The circular telegram issued to the Dominions on 6 October, referred to earlier,³ in addition to the phrase about freeing "Europe from the menace of aggression", commented that it was also "necessary to remember" that "assurances given by the German Government in the past have on many occasions proved worthless that something more than words will be required to establish the confidence which must be the essential basis of peace". Thus although not their "considered view" the initial public reaction of the Government could

¹*Cadogan Diary, 6th Oct., ACAD 1/8.*

²*BBC (WAC) News Bulletins, Reel 14, 17th Oct.*

³*Cab 21/952, folios 225-6, 6th Oct. Circular telegram to Dominions.*

best be described as unfavourable, rather than one of outright hostility, with the question of some sort of guarantee "more than words" being the most fundamental factor affecting their thinking.

On 7 October, the Cabinet met to discuss Hitler's speech, an occasion which affords the first opportunity to gauge Ministers' reactions. Lord Halifax's initial comment was that "there could be no two opinions to the unsatisfactory nature of the speech itself", yet time must be taken in considering the "form of the reply". He wished care to be taken against "making an appearance of entering into negotiations", and followed this by stating his reason for this reaction to Hitler's speech. This was that in his own mind he was coming more and more to the view that his chief war aim was the elimination of Herr Hitler". Such a statement may be considered as surprising in two regards: firstly, that after over a month of war, he was only "coming" to this view; and secondly, that for the rest of the "Phoney War" he never really adopted this position with any finality. When it came to considering how to reply to Hitler, there could be no direct call for his removal - for fear of "uniting the German people" behind their Chancellor - so instead "We should therefore take the view that it was for the German Government to say how this difficulty [of Hitler's credibility] could be overcome".¹ Concurrence was expressed during the evening discussion with Halifax's desire for "a statement ending on a note of enquiry", and it was noted that Hitler's speech had not greatly attracted that "small section of opinion in this country [which] held pacifist views". It is possible to detect something of an air of relief in this, as the move of broadly anti-war opinion which had arisen in expectation of Hitler's speech had caused some anxiety.

The same day Sir Samuel Hoare wrote to Lord Lothian in Washington about his reaction to Hitler. Again the line of reply advocated was

¹ *Cab 65/1, WM (39) 40, 7th Oct.*

one of further questioning rather than of "a curt and immediate refusal". The reason for this being that if "there is anything genuine in this offer we shall discover it by this means, and if there is not; we shall prove to this country and to the world the emptiness of his words". Thus, although Halifax appeared temporarily to have despaired of Hitler, Hoare, still one of Chamberlain's closest allies, persisted in thinking that Hitler's position was at best "not clear".¹

The Prime Minister's position was first laid out in the letter of 8 October to his sisters. After expressing his anxiety about such a peace offer providing encouragement to the "peace-at-any-price people",² he continued:

"I refused to think about it that night but next morning it was clear in my own mind that it offered no real advance in mind or spirit towards a reasonable peace and that it must be rejected, but in such a way as to "pass the buck" once again ..."

Given that the proposals offered "no real advance", the problem became how to reject Hitler's offer, and yet at the same time to invite him to come up with a new one or else bear the responsibility for terminating the exchanges. If Hitler's refusal to carry things further caused discontent in Germany, then this was an added advantage. Such matters were the preoccupation of the Government over the next few days.

Chamberlain's reasons for holding that the speech offered "no real advance" were two-fold. On the one hand, he wrote "My view has been that it was too early for any hope of a successful peace negotiation". Not that it was too late for talk of peace but that, although peace would have to be discussed, it was yet too soon for this. The reason being

¹Templewood Papers, Vol. XI/2, letter to Lord Lothian, 7th Oct.

²Chamberlain Letters to sisters, Neville Chamberlain Papers, 8th Oct. NC 18/1/1124.

"the Germans not yet being sufficiently convinced that they could not win ...".

The Prime Minister's aim was therefore not to wait until the Germans were defeated before making or imposing peace, but to wait until they were "convinced that they could not win". Such a peace would not resemble Versailles in terms and, he hoped, last for longer. He continued:

"I still hold this view [of it being too early for peace] and for that reason I did not want an offer which would be sufficiently specious to encourage the peace-at-any-price people".

A specious offer, superficially extending the prospect of peace, was feared, not because it was peace and he wanted war, but because Chamberlain, while determined to negotiate with Germany, was equally determined not to be pushed into a premature negotiation leading to "patched-up-peace" of temporary duration .

As well as being "too early" for peace, the Prime Minister's second line of reasoning was the "difficulty" that "you can't believe anything Hitler says". This was a familiar refrain, a cry almost of despair that normal dealings were impossible. On this occasion Chamberlain follows it with an altogether more unusual statement: "Everyone will also I think begin to see that the only chance of peace is the disappearance of Hitler and that is what we are working for". Before taking this to imply that Britain's war aims can be defined simply as to ensure Hitler's removal, both the wording and the context of this phrase need to be examined in more detail. It was true that one of the ways of securing peace was seen to be "the disappearance of Hitler" - or his "elimination"¹ as Halifax noted earlier, but this was never formalised

¹ *Cab 65/1, WM (39) 40, 7th Oct.*

or ratified as Government policy. It was an aim, but by no means the only solution to the problem of securing peace. Given their experience of dealing with Hitler over the previous few years, it is perhaps surprising that the removal of Hitler, personally, never became the single fundamental and irreplaceable war aim. Instead, as noted elsewhere, it was "Hitlerism", the policy of German aggression, which occupied this place.

On 10 October, the Prime Minister wrote to his Canadian counterpart, Mackenzie King, explaining the thinking behind the reaction to Hitler's speech. He wrote; "no-one would be readier than I to seize any opportunity which I thought would in practice lead to a real and settled peace. But we must remember that all the evidence before us goes to show that Hitler's present move is merely a tactical one couched in vague and unsatisfactory terms and intended to weaken our position ..."¹ Chamberlain did not think that talking about the terms Hitler had suggested would produce that "real and settled peace" which was his aim. The dilemma, therefore, was one of how to reply to Hitler's proposals, how best to express accurately, without exaggeration or compromise, Britain's determination to fight on until a secure peace could be achieved.

Once Hitler had delivered his long-awaited speech, the question of how it should be answered became of paramount importance. For some of those involved, their reaction hinged around exactly how far they thought Hitler had gone towards meeting Britain's minimum war aim of security from repeated aggression in Europe, while to many the point was that it was Hitler offering it. For others, their perspective was formed not so much by the terms offered, but more in relation to the fact that an offer, any offer, had been made. These latter people either advocated

¹*It must be borne in mind that Chamberlain suspected Mackenzie King of being rather too eager to conclude a peace.*

a swift commencement of negotiations or else an earnest following up of Hitler's plainly unsatisfactory offer to see how far he would go towards an accommodation of Britain's objectives.

One of those whose reaction was governed by the conclusion that the terms offered by Hitler were unacceptable was Leo Amery. On 9 October he urged Lord Halifax to give an "unequivocal" reply, which would "put an end to the miserable kind of defeatism which Lloyd George and a few others are trying to spread".¹ Leaving aside those who followed the line of Lloyd George's "miserable kind of defeatism" for the moment, there were those who wished to make use of the opportunity for putting proposals which Hitler had created by his speech, although they had no wish to use Hitler's terms even as a starting point. It was this option which Ministers were concerned would feed "the doubts, and in many cases apathy" of many, which existed "by no means least in the House of Commons itself".²

The most influential proponent of the position for using the occasion of Hitler's speech while disregarding its content was the former - and future - Labour Minister, Sir Stafford Cripps. Soon after 6 October, Cripps wrote to Lord Halifax that "there are frank statements of my opinion ... which I could not express in an open session of Parliament", accompanying it with a memorandum.³ Cripps first outlined his position in regard to Hitler's statement in the following way. "No responsible person" he wrote "could turn down such an offer without first giving it the most careful attention and without assigning a very good reason for his action". The reason for this note of caution being that "if the present offer is turned down undoubtedly we must embark upon a war of great difficulty and in my view of growing difficulty". The fundamental consideration was not so much Britain's war aims and whether Hitler's

¹FO 800/317, H/XV/319, 9th Oct.

²Wallace Diary, 6th Oct. Comments about meeting of Ministers on the Home Policy Committee. Mss Eng Hist. c 495.

³FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/32, either 7th or 8th Oct.

speech offered a realistic prospect of their fulfilment, but was the enormous human social and financial costs of a great war, and whether Britain's hoped for aims were really in proportion to this tremendous sacrifice; ideas similar to Lloyd George's. This attention to costs rather than aims, to the risks of fighting rather than the risks of not fighting, was the fundamental concern of many of those who advocated peace, and injected an extra element of caution into many members of the Government, the Prime Minister in particular.

Hitler's proposals, in Cripps' view, must be rejected despite the dangers of such a course, because acceptance would "place the safety of this country and its civilisation in the hands of Hitler". Therefore what Cripps proposed was "some counter-offer". This was to be based on self-determination, disarmament, economic planning and a supranational tribunal, and was designed as a "counter-bid" to Hitler, guaranteed by closer Anglo-Soviet relations. Such a proposal was never likely to be accepted by the Government, as not only did its guarantees appear both unreliable and unacceptable but, more importantly, it looked for changes in the nature of Britain's power, especially imperial power, which the Government had hoped that going to war would prevent.

As well as the type of reasoning displayed by Sir Stafford Cripps, there were those whose reactions showed that they felt that Hitler had offered some hope. Harold Nicolson's diary for 6 October concluded that Hitler "offers us peace on terms of ceding the colonies and recognising his Eastern conquests. It is a mild speech. Very mild".¹ Yet Nicolson did not really belong to those who desired to take advantage of the occasion of Hitler's offer; to him it was more in the nature of an encouraging sign that negotiation might be possible in the future. One set of people who did want to use Hitler's speech as at least the

¹*Nicolson Diary, 6th Oct., Typescript.*

basis of negotiation was the Executive Committee of the National Peace Council. On 6 October they drafted a resolution to be sent to the Prime Minister which read:

"In the opinion of the Committee, these proposals [of Hitler's] which clearly envisage discussion not only of vital issues for which this country has gone to war, but also of basic economic problems which must be solved if settled peace is to be secured in Europe - are such as to provide at least the basis of truce and conference, in which, in the Committee's view His Majesty's Government ought to take part".¹

The basic reasoning for such a conclusion being similar to that of Cripps. "In the face of the alternative of world war and destruction on an unlimited scale, no chance of arriving at an honourable peace should be neglected",² the resolution concluded. In the eyes of the National Peace Council and those who thought likewise, the Government's task was to determine whether Hitler's speech gave the "chance of arriving at an honourable peace", a treaty which would establish European security, or whether it could only lead to a truce while the nations of Europe pondered upon who would be the next victim. In the days before the Prime Minister's speech of reply in the House of Commons, those who desired that the first conclusion be reached lobbied hard to that effect, one of their main arguments being the alleged very considerable "anxiety ... that the opportunity of a conference at this present juncture in world affairs should not be hastily refused",³ a concern which was felt by the Government as well.

Lloyd George's position at this time was that use should be made of Hitler's offer, not his terms, and that the opportunity was there for

¹NPC 2/5. *Executive Committee resolution. National Peace Council Papers. British Library of Political and Economic Science.*

²*Ibid.*

³FO 800/317, H/XV/318A, 9th Oct. Bishop of Litchfield to Lord Halifax.

a secure peace. In reply to a letter from Churchill, who had passed on Jan Smutts' rejection of Hitler's speech to him, Lloyd George retorted that Smutts "may be right in his conjecture that Hitler's peace offer has no other purpose than "simply that of a peace offensive to weaken us". That is why I would have a peace counter offensive to baffle him and strengthen us".¹ The Government ought to seek peace not by accepting Hitler's formulation, but by putting forward a plan of its own and challenging Hitler to refuse it.² Were such a policy not pursued, the consequences would be grave indeed. As the former Prime Minister warned Lord Mottistone on 9 October:

"If they reject this chance of making peace it will not be long before Britain will realise that they have committed the most calamitous mistake perpetrated by British statesmanship since the days of Lord North".³

That was a serious charge to make, but it must be noted that it was not the rejection of Hitler's terms which would be "the most calamitous mistake" in British foreign policy for 150 years, but the refusal of "this chance of making peace", which had arisen as a result of the fact that the enemy was willing to discuss the subject at all. This distinction, although crucial to the understanding of Lloyd George's attitude, was not always appreciated at the time. Not only was Leo Amery unfair in attributing to Lloyd George "miserable defeatism",⁴ and Neville Chamberlain inaccurate in saying that the former Prime Minister [and personal enemy] wanted "peace-at-any-price",⁵ but many of those who actually did want "peace-at-any-price" looked to him for leadership, either in ignorance or in disregard of their fundamental differences of attitude.

¹Lloyd George Papers, 9th Oct., LG/G/Box 4, letter to Churchill. Quotation from Smutts' Telegram.

²This ignored the formidable problem of the formulation of a set of war aims.

³Lloyd George to Lord Mottistone, 9th Oct., LG/G/Box 15. Lloyd George Papers.

⁴Amery Diary, 9th Oct.

⁵Chamberlain Papers, Letters to sisters, 8th Oct. NC 18/1/1124.

In October 1939, Lloyd George became the brief focus for all those sought negotiations for peace, for whatever reason and from all points on the political spectrum. All difference was submerged in the common aim of avoiding a repetition of the Great War. It was for this reason that Lloyd George could receive a telegram of encouragement from Lord Rothermere saying "You are a grand old warhorse go ahead with your present policy and you will win hands down",¹ and at the same time have the New Statesman publish an article "The Right Reply to Hitler"² which followed his line of reasoning very closely. Although it did not seem to matter to some what Lloyd George was actually saying - the very fact that he was talking about negotiations caused people to jump to a conclusion one way or another - in fact he expounded a line both clear and consistent during the months of October and November 1939. Apart from his speech in Parliament on 3 October, Lloyd George put across his ideas in a weekly column in the Sunday Express and on 8 October this article dealt with Hitler's speech.³ After prefacing his remarks on the subject by exclaiming that he was "at a loss to understand how they [the Allies] hope to bring the war to a successful end in three years",⁴ a factor which underlay much of his reasoning as well, Lloyd George quickly turned to his main theme:

"Hitler is in no hurry to launch an all round offensive.

In his Reichstag speech he has made a bid for peace.

What is it worth? Should it be forthwith spurned without counter proposals which will appeal to the convenience of the civilised world?

¹Lloyd George Papers LG/G/Box 17, 9th Oct.

²Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 53, 14th Oct.

³Lloyd George wrote a weekly article at this time.

⁴The main reason for this being the effect of Russian supplies partially negating the impact of the blockade.

Let us examine this momentous question with a calm and judicial gravity which is demanded of statesmanship in view of the terrible prospect opened out by the rejection of a peace conference".

Thus the overriding importance was to be attached to the consequences of not making peace, rather than to the inherent risks of peace-making. For Lloyd George the issue that necessitates "judicial gravity" in dealing with Hitler's proposals was the "terrible prospect" that the war held out. It was this which led him to call that Hitler's speech be not examined "with a desire to find reason for rejection". Despite there being many such reasons "which could be quoted in justification" of such a rejection, a different criterion was called for. It would not do, Lloyd George maintained, to determine whether there was any fault with the offer, but rather;

"... is there enough [fault] to warrant a refusal to enter into a conference of nations - including neutrals - to examine the possibility of reaching a just and durable peace, which would be guaranteed not by Hitler's word but by the Great Powers of the world who would also be signatories?"

Lloyd George's objective was therefore a "just and durable" peace, "guaranteed" by something other than Hitler's discredited word. On such a reading, the objectives of Lloyd George on the one hand, and of Chamberlain and Halifax on the other appear to have considerable similarities. Both positions looked towards a lasting and "guaranteed" peace, where there were no prospects for further German expansion. Yet each side meant something different by the word "guaranteed"; a difference which was rooted in opposite perceptions of whether Hitler could be forced to surrender his expansion policy through a peace treaty at that time. For the Government the hope for a peace lay in the future, after

continued war had changed the German mind; for such as Lloyd George this hope lay in peace backed by a concert of powers, before war closed all doors but that of mutual destruction. Thus to those of Lloyd George's persuasion the issue of whether Hitler had given up his aggressive policy was of strictly secondary importance. A treaty based on the consent of all the major powers would render any residual expansionism redundant. If there were agreements about colonies and trade, about Poland and other European borders, and especially about disarmament, "the safest and soundest of all warranties of peace", with the world's major powers acting as guarantors, then further German aggression would be both unnecessary and impossibly risky. Therefore Britain could safely enter into negotiations to secure such a settlement.

Although the view that the occasion of Hitler's speech could create an opportunity for peace was the more significant, there were also those who greeted the terms themselves with some enthusiasm. These tended to be people on the fringes of political life, or mavericks such as the Marquis of Tavistock, soon to become Duke of Bedford, who considered Hitler's terms as "quite a fair basis to start on".¹ Others, for example Sir Ernest Bennett MP, who wrote that to reject Hitler's offer "would be morally indefensible",² and Lord Brocket³ concentrated on trying to stiffen Lloyd George in his non-rejection of peace. Lord Brocket did so by keeping the former Prime Minister informed of meetings of "Members of both Houses" held to discuss negotiating a peace.⁴

The issue raised by Lloyd George and those who can briefly be termed his "allies" was whether the Government felt sufficiently confident of its convictions and position to reject the preferred opportunity of peace. To spurn Hitler on that occasion would condemn Europe to further

¹Lloyd George Papers, Lord Tavistock to Lloyd George, LG/G/Box 3, 11th Oct.

²Lloyd George Papers, Sir Ernest Bennett to Lloyd George, LG/G/Box 50/I. mid-Oct.

³Who felt that Hitler's speech "may be the starting point for a real peace and not a real war". Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 58, 8th Oct.

⁴Ibid.

war. That much all agreed upon. What the Government needed to decide was whether the utility of war outweighed the more immediately obvious benefits of peace¹ - or at least a truce. But what if the Government did reject Hitler's present offer? It was just this that they were doing - and nothing more. The answer to Hitler's 6 October speech had little to do with the advisability of a negotiated settlement at some time, and had not a great deal more to say about peace with Hitler beyond the need for additional "guarantees" to ensure German compliance. It was an answer to the terms and occasion of the offer, relating primarily to these details and background; it was not an advance rejection of future negotiations.

In its reply to Hitler, the Government did not merely have to bear in mind the domestic considerations already mentioned. There were two other sources of opinion which had to be given great weight: France and the Dominions.

When it came to co-ordinating a reply with the French, the Allies were, as ever, out of step. The French, noted Cadogan, were "very fussed about our procedure of saying we are going to "examine" Hitler's speech and reply on Wednesday".² In effect Daladier wanted to ignore Hitler's statement and feared that the British procedure was making too much of so worthless an utterance. Cadogan, whose views upon the speech itself were in complete concurrence with Paris, nevertheless continued in his diary:

"The French are very difficult. If we reply at once, they reproach us for not consulting them. If we take some days to consult them, they say this will "produce a bad effect"."

¹Much of this argument turned on whether the 'peace' proffered was anything more than a temporary and illusory one. If so, the benefits of peace would be far fewer than its proponents contended.

²Cadogan Diary, 8th Oct. After a talk with the French Ambassador, Corbin, who had just returned from discussions with Daladier in Paris, p.222. *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938-1945. Edited by David Dilkes. London: Cassell. 1971. Subsequently; Cadogan Diaries.*

Yet it would be wrong to interpret the difficulty as entirely procedural, and Cadogan's personal record shows that potential divisions which became acute later on were already evident.¹

"We can't now simply ignore Hitler's speech. He [Corbin] also trotted out the silly French arguments against attacking Hitler. I said I quite saw these but, as an immediate war aim, I thought it would be invaluable to get rid of Hitler".

In the report of this interview prepared for the Foreign Secretary, it was noted that the French Ambassador objected to the British emphasis on the removal of Hitler, and maintained that if Goering replaced Hitler, the German regime would not "differ very much from what we had at present". Cadogan in reply stated his opinion of the British position - which was not altogether how the Prime Minister would have phrased it. This was that Hitler was not the only obstacle to peace,² but that if he were eliminated "there would be such disunity and perplexity in Germany as to hamper her considerably" and that the "disappearance of Herr Hitler would produce an immediate and possibly favourable change in the situation". This was in fact a considerable understatement of the general consensus of the Cabinet as to the effects of the "disappearance" of Hitler, but it did help to prevent a serious misunderstanding between Paris and London over this point. Although such distinctions over the importance of Hitler's removal may seem slightly abstruse now, it must be remembered that they represented deeper divergences: as Horace Wilson noted on 8 October, a reply along the French lines "would not satisfy opinion over here".³ This was as clear at the time to Cadogan as it was to Corbin. In his diary entry for 8

¹*This will be dealt with in the following chapter.*

²*Cadogan Diaries, 8th Oct. p. 222.*

³*Prem 1/395, 8th Oct., folio 9.*

October, the former concluded the entry about his conversation with the French Ambassador in the following way:

"The French say that it's not only Hitler, but the German nation - "Il faut en finir". Yes, but how? The French are a logical race: oughtn't they to stop and ask themselves how to "en finir"?"¹

In the face of the French Government's insistence on defeating and finishing Germany, Cadogan repeated the British determination not to set their eyes upon unachievable objectives. Instead they set their course for what might be practical in the foreseeable future. For the French Government² to hope to defeat Germany, they had to be embracing the prospect of a repetition of the First World War, a war of maximum national commitment and mobilization. Chamberlain's Government never accepted the absolute necessity of this, always instead looking for short-cuts to security. In many regards they wished for a war of minimum involvement and sacrifice, and tailored their aims in accordance with the effort they were prepared to expend on achieving them.

The other Governments to be consulted officially about the reply to Hitler were those of the Dominions, and here too the process revealed some underlying divergence of view. As Leo Amery recorded, "I gathered ... from Chatfield, that it had proved pretty difficult co-ordinating all the Dominion replies, the real difficulty I gather being Mackenzie King",³ the Canadian Prime Minister. Whereas the French Government had objected to the narrowness of London's aims, and while Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were broadly content to follow Britain's

¹*Cadogan Diaries*, 8th Oct. This was of course exactly the sort of question which Lloyd George was asking of the British Government. p.222-3.

²In the light of the wide divergence on war aims in French political life - wider and deeper than in Britain - it is probably wiser to attribute such policies to the French Government rather than to the whole of France.

³*Amery Diary*, 10th Oct.

lead, the Canadian view was that Chamberlain was adopting too bellicose a position.

The above "difficulty" surfaced as a result of a telegram of 9 October from Mackenzie King which outlined a possible procedure for peace. Broadly speaking this procedure envisaged the setting up of a "Committee of Neutral Powers" to carry out an "investigation" and to "report on methods of adjusting [the] European situation". The committee was to consist of President Roosevelt and the Kings of Belgium and Italy, "or such other personages as might appear to be preferable", and the point of reference was to be the situation which existed on 1 September, or possibly earlier. While the committee was sitting an "unconditional truce" was to be arranged, with the forthcoming report being "conveyed to the powers concerned for acceptance, rejection or modification after [a] conference". These proposals, were they ever put, would have been totally unacceptable to both sides, and were very similar to many of the plans submitted by those described in Cabinet as wanting peace-at-any-price. To the Germans the main stumbling block was likely to have been that of the starting date of 1 September or before as, at the very least, it nullified the actual gains made in Poland. For Britain, the very fact that German troops were to remain in Poland during the committee's sitting gave little hope of them ever being removed and therefore of showing that aggression had failed. The Canadian Prime Minister was aware of these difficulties, and in phrases reminiscent of Lloyd George's sentiments his telegram tried to pre-empt them.

"I recognise objections which can be brought to this or any other procedure under the present circumstances, but I wish to bring it to your attention because I realise how deeply you desire both to build up assurances against rumours and tension in [the] future and to avoid if humanly possible the destruction of life and European

Civilisation which prolonged war could bring".¹

Mackenzie King, therefore, was willing to contemplate a conference with Hitler, but only where neither he nor anybody else was allowed to dictate terms. In order that this did not develop into a very damaging rift with the Canadians, a schism which would have had deep repercussions on British morale and United States sympathies, Chamberlain's telegram of reply showed just how far he was prepared to go in using the occasion of Hitler's speech. He opened with a declaration which was true of his position throughout the "Phoney War"; that "no-one would be readier than I to seize any opportunity which I thought would in practice conduce to a real and settled peace". Having stated this, Chamberlain then proceeded to argue that Hitler had not given such an opportunity; instead it was a mere tactical move "intended to weaken our position". The net result of these two considerations being that:

"... our proposed reply is by no means a simple rejection of Hitler's proposal. It is intended to outline the object which you have in mind of placing upon the German Government the onus of rejecting a peaceful solution".²

Despite Chamberlain's assertion, Mackenzie King's object was not that the Germans should have "the onus of rejecting a peaceful solution", but that Britain herself should suggest a procedure for bringing about peace. Neither the Prime Minister nor the Cabinet, however, were prepared to suggest anything any longer. Although they were willing to listen, they would not make a move towards peace until there had been a fundamental change of heart - and possibly of Chancellor - in Germany.

In addition to the above-mentioned contributory factors, the

¹*Cab 21/952, 9th Oct., folios 237-8 , From Mackenzie King.*

²*Cab 21/952, 10th Oct., folio 222 , From Chamberlain.*

Cabinet had to fit its reply into previously held views upon matters such as the position of Poland on War Aims generally and upon German and Allied domestic opinions, and these influences will now be examined. .

During the Cabinet discussions on 9 October about the reply to be given to Hitler, the Prime Minister raised the point that Hitler had "said in effect that there was to be no further discussion about Poland, as her future was the concern of Germany and Russia exclusively". In answer to this, Chamberlain said that he should "make it quite clear that it was an impossible basis for starting peace negotiations". This should not be taken to imply that the restoration of pre-September Poland was an essential for peace; as Chamberlain continued to say, he was not willing "to commit ourselves to any specific solution of the Polish Problem".¹ As had been stated earlier, Britain was not fighting for Poland, and nor was she demanding the complete restoration of the Polish State either before or after a Peace Conference. Poland was a secondary issue; the primary one was that security be restored to Europe. As the Prime Minister put it "An essential preliminary of any discussion would need to be action which would be evidence of Germany's intention to abandon the policy of domination by force, to accept discussion and to abide by their words".² It was in such a context that the issue of Poland was considered; as an evidence of intent, rather than an irreducible minimum objective.

Similar criteria were also applied to the more general considerations of how Hitler's offer corresponded with Britain's overall war aims. The Government was looking for evidence of German seriousness. Yet because the Prime Minister was determined to "avoid any precise statement of our war aims",³ in case a specific consideration might get in the way of the achievement of the larger goal, it is not possible to be

¹*Cab 65/1* , *WM (39) 42*, 9th Oct.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

categorical as to what this evidence should constitute.

The question of the detail of war aims to which the Government should commit itself was not one upon which all members of the Cabinet agreed. The minutes of the 9 October Cabinet Meeting, referred to earlier, record that the Foreign Secretary and Lord Chatfield, the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, "attach importance to making clear the general nature of our aims at any Peace Conference". Their reasoning being that "otherwise there was a risk that moderate Germans would feel that, if they deserted Nazism, they would be faced with a dictated peace".¹ Yet in the end the Prime Minister's position held sway, and it was agreed "that we should not state our war aims in detail, and that this would have to be done in very general terms as, for example, that we were fighting for the restoration of the life and sovereignty of Poland". Such a phrase as "life and sovereignty" allowed so much room for manoeuvre that all it really committed Britain to was that Poland should no longer be a German protectorate; beyond that any arrangement could be acceptable. There was no mention made of other issues - because, as Britain had found after the Great War, too much precision of objective can of itself create serious obstacles to a general peace settlement. What Chamberlain desired was "evidence" of a change in the German policy of aggression. When such evidence was furnished by Hitler or his replacement, then would be the time to decide whether it was sufficient. Up to 10 October, however, no such admissible evidence had been forthcoming.

A final influence on the formation of the Government's reply to Hitler was the extent to which they had to look over their shoulder at the unity and soundness of British public opinion. It is surprising, to say the least, that in the same month as Hitler's speech, the Ministry

¹Cab 65/1, WM (39) 42, 9th Oct.

It is of interest to note here the significance of perceived German public opinion, and its potential for unrest, upon Cabinet thinking.

of Information produced a pamphlet entitled "Hitler and the Working Man". It would be thought that what was in practice Britain's propaganda ministry would have used such a title to vilify Nazi policy, yet what was actually written was a good deal more mild and bears quotation at some length.

"National Socialism began as an honourable experiment.

Its leaders started with many fine ideals and the German people had every right to expect that they would be realised. Ideals and expectations have been disappointed: both have been sacrificed to the ends of war ... This is the tragedy of National Socialism".¹

Describing one's opposing regime as "an honourable experiment" turned sour was hardly the way to galvanise public opinion. Instead Ian McLaine is correct when he writes that this pamphlet was "symptomatic of the extent to which the spirit of appeasement still pervaded the Chamberlain Government".² Also symptomatic of this was the letter written by Lord Perth, who had briefly held the position of adviser on Foreign Publicity at the Ministry of Information. In this he suggested that in response to Hitler's "peace terms", Mussolini ought to be brought into the picture as it would flatter him and since he would be a useful intermediary as in September 1938.³ What might be termed the pro-Munich opinion was not a major concern for the Government. Rather, it was that large section of opinion which had not wanted a flat and final rejection of the occasion offered by Hitler's speech which needed to be watched carefully. This was expressed by the Home Secretary, Sir John Anderson, in a letter to Chamberlain. There were, Anderson thought, a "very large" number of people "decent and thoroughly loyal"

¹ Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*. London: Allen and Unwin. 1979. p.141, Oct. 1939. Subsequently, McLaine.

² *Ibid.*

³ FO 800/325, H/XL/9, 7th Oct., to Cadogan.

who will "not mind how firm the reply to Hitler is, provided it is also constructive. If it were deficient in this respect", he continued, "I believe we should see before long a serious weakening of the home front".¹ Throughout this period the Government was very wary of any possible dent in British morale, held to be a major war-winning advantage of the Allies - and some of their public caution was due to the desire to appear "constructive".

The discussions about how to reply to Hitler and indeed the reply that was finally given need to be viewed from two perspectives. There was the obvious consideration of what sort of response should be given to Hitler's terms and there was also the relation of both offer and reply to the Government's overall view of the war. As noted earlier, the French Government could not understand why Chamberlain wished to give so much consideration to the reply, feeling instead that to ignore it was a much sounder policy.² Cadogan's reply that such was the normal process, to allow adequate consultation with the Dominions and with France herself, was indeed the case. Yet behind the French objection to lengthy discussions lay a disquiet about the awkward questions which might thus be raised in London, but more especially in Paris. Similarly, Chamberlain's refusal of hasty action contained in it the desire to see beyond the terms proposed; to ascertain whether the first step on an acceptable path to peace had been taken.

In a paper produced for Cabinet on the procedure for formulating the British reply, it was stated that "HMG would be glad to have beforehand views as to the line of reply" from the Dominions, France and "USA - if possible". There was no attempt to produce a joint reply with France, nor an effort at synchronisation,³ merely an ascertaining of

¹Prem 1/395, 10th Oct.

²Cab 21/952, folio 213, 10th Oct. For Cadogan's account of his talk with Corbin, *Cadogan Diaries*, 8th Oct, p. 222-3.

³Daladier's prompt and dismissive denunciation of Hitler's "Offer" made this impossible, but there had been no common approach worked out beforehand either.

"views", which is apt testimony to the lack of alliance unity. The "suggested" line of reply upon which Allies and United States opinion was sought was that:

"Proposals as set out in Hitler's speech of 6 October are so vague as not to be susceptible to useful comment at this stage".¹

However, although this was largely the tone of the final reply concerning the speech itself, the above procedural memorandum broadened the discussion by "considering" the nature of "any proposals for settlement". It is in this expansion of the terms of reference that the deeper significance of Chamberlain's reply to Hitler lay. The two factors which had to be borne in mind in such a wider consideration were:

- "(a) the terms proposed, and
- (b) satisfactory assurance as to observance.

In the view of HMG it is useless to consider (a) in advance of (b); the first essential being that there should be effective guarantees

- (1) that the rule of violence shall cease, and
- (2) that the word of Governments, once pledged, shall henceforth be kept".

In the context of the ideas put forward by Hitler, such thinking could be seen as rather obtuse were it not for the concluding two sentences of the memorandum:

"Agreement as to effective guarantees is an essential preliminary to discussion of the merits of any proposed

¹ Prem 1/395, 6th Oct. Note for Chamberlain before War Cabinet discussion.

settlement. In the view of HMG therefore the next step is for the German Government to indicate what these guarantees are to be".

In other words, the fact that Hitler's proposals were "so vague as not to be susceptible to useful comment" was not the primary point. What mattered was what guarantees were to be offered. As the German Government had so far failed to "indicate what these guarantees are to be", the overriding aim of the reply was to state that because of this nothing useful had been put forward and to invite Hitler to remedy this shortcoming at once.

The Times of 11 October, writing in knowledgeable anticipation of the Prime Minister's speech, noted that "It is expected that the reply will be a firm refusal of the peace proposals so far made, and Mr Chamberlain will be speaking with the mind of all the nations of the British Commonwealth".¹ There was indeed a rejection of "proposals so far made" - as there was in France - but where the Allies differed was that the British drafters looked to see whether this refusal could become the beginning of the long road to peace.

As far as the Prime Minister was concerned, the possibilities of forcing Hitler to come up with realistic guarantees - or of Germany coming up with an alternative to Hitler, which was seen as some sort of guarantee in itself - had been enhanced since the beginning of the war. Therefore Chamberlain considered it no mere irrelevance to ask further questions of Hitler. In a letter of 25 October the Prime Minister outlines his reasoning for this optimistic conclusion. For Hitler to have "allowed France to mobilise and the BEF to go to France" were "military blunders of the first magnitude", and the pact with Russia could be described as "a diplomatic blunder no less fatal". Therefore, he asserted, "now

¹*The Times*, 11th Oct., Main news page. This is hardly surprising given its Editor's close social contact with Halifax and Chamberlain.

he [Hitler] has got himself into a complete jam and doesn't know what to do next, and if we can hold firm he is done".¹ Ten days previously Chamberlain described another angle of Hitler's perceived difficulties. The German Chancellor was, he wrote to his sisters, "between the horns of a dilemma", because,

"Whatever the risks of an attack, those of doing nothing are also serious. When you have lied and humbugged your people with the belief that there will be no war because no one dare go to war with you and that if they did you could smash them to bits in a jiffy, it is very difficult to explain away your failure to do anything of the kind".

Sir John Simon, however, reflected a more realistic, or pessimistic, view when he noted "I fear we are forced to the horrible conclusion that unless Hitler, owing to internal pressure, climbs down (which, at this stage, seems most unlikely) there is no choice but to undergo the dreadful trial of intense warfare".² The task of the drafters of the Prime Minister's reply was therefore to reject the terms offered in a way which showed no yielding in Britain's firmness yet at the same time pointed to the course Hitler should take if he was serious about peace.

¹*Chamberlain Papers, NC7/6, 25th Oct. To Arthur Chamberlain. Another extract from this letter, although not strictly relevant at this point, is worthy of quotation: "Hitler's psychology is enough to baffle anybody and this is not surprising seeing that he is quite abnormal. I think the explanation of his actions is that there is no continuity about him, though there is frequent reversion to former ideas. Thus at any given moment he may be convinced that he only wants one thing and that when he gets it he will be satisfied. But quite shortly afterwards all that will have passed out of his mind and he is concentrated just as intently on some other object. One thought has been constantly present to him and one sees it coming back again and again in his speeches:*

"If England will only leave me a free hand to do what I like in Europe which doesn't concern her, I would be ready to leave her a free hand to do what she likes in the rest of the world".

²*Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1125. 15th Oct.; Simon Diary, 13th Oct. Mss Simon 11.*

Having thus outlined the general considerations surrounding the reply to be given, it is now possible to look in detail at the drafting process of that reply itself. One of the earliest outlines for a reply to Hitler was Samuel Hoare's on 7 October, when he noted in his diary:

- "1) Exordium on what has happened in the war.
- 2) Our position is clear. Re-state it.
- 3) German position not clear, e.g. go through obscurities.
- 4) Ask the Germans to clarify it.
- 5) Even if they do, what are the sanctions?"¹

However, the first official draft was produced the next day by the Foreign Secretary, on instruction from the Cabinet, as a "basis for discussion".² After a lengthy description of the content of Hitler's speech, similar in tone to Ivone Kirkpatrick's initial summary,³ Halifax outlined the Government's position. They would, he wrote, be ready "to bring all the questions of issues between nations to the conference table", if only they could be sure "that rules and engagements observed by themselves would be equally observed by others". The difficulty with the last point was, of course, Hitler's "assurances that have often been given and not less often contradicted", therefore "in the light of past experience, it is no longer possible to have faith in Herr Hitler's word". He envisaged no difficulty in "non-belligerent" powers being invited to a conference, and concluded:

"There will be no ground for war if the German Government can convince other countries that they no longer desire to dominate other peoples, and can satisfy the world that, if any basis for an acceptable peace settlement could be

¹*Templewood Diary, Vol. XI/2, 7th Oct.*

²*Cab 66/2, WP(39)77, 8th Oct.*

³*Prem 1/395, 6th Oct., Reuter's copy of Hitler's speech.*

found, the settlement would be respected. No-one can do this but the German Government and it is for them to consider practical means by which such essential and certain confidence can be created".

Despite the emphasis on the need for effective guarantees in this and all other papers dealing with the prospects for peace, there is here, as elsewhere, no mention of a guarantor power or body. This was not an implicit rejection of help from third parties; on the contrary the Government "certainly would welcome and support any genuine efforts ... as might liberate Europe from the abiding threat of war, that has in these last years passed under the name of peace". It was rather that any such efforts would be fruitless without nations possessing "confidence in one another's good faith", which had been shattered by Hitler's repeated undermining of it. The issue therefore was not whether some third party, however powerful, would guarantee the peace, but whether Germany's ruler was prepared to honour his obligations. Without this there was no point in a separate guarantor, and with it a guarantor would no longer be essential. In conclusion on this point, Sir John Simon's comments about potential guarantor powers is most illuminating:

"Faced with the prospect of the most frightful and terrible events people naturally put forward suggestions that all matters at dispute ought to be settled by an international conference, or by a neutral body, consisting of Belgium, Holland, the Scandinavian countries and President Roosevelt. But President Roosevelt has given no indication that he would be willing to attempt anything of the kind and the small countries of Europe are living in terror of Germany and certainly could have no effective power to settle anything".¹

¹*Simon Diary, 13th Oct. Mss Simon 11.*

Thus even had the Government sought a guarantor power, none was readily available or acceptable anyway.

With the production of Halifax's initial draft reply came the views of others closely involved. Cadogan's main preoccupation was that as Hitler had refused appeals for a conference the previous August, he could not now be realistic in his proposals.¹ As noted earlier, the Prime Minister did not agree because he felt that Hitler was now in a worse position than before and therefore possibly more amenable to peace.² Vansittart, however, adopted an approach which aimed at "keeping Hitler talking till mid-November, and leading him into the mud, militarily as well as diplomatically". This was to be done by asking Hitler "for more precise specifications of what he has in mind".³ This attempt to gain militarily valuable time by appearing to seek clarification from Germany won little support within the Government, with Churchill writing the following day to Chamberlain that "we should not attempt to manoeuvre in order to gain time".⁴ The question of sounding the right tone in reply to Hitler was seen as more important than any such considerations, however well designed from a purely military point of view.

The main drafting was carried out by a small group comprising the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, naturally enough, but also Churchill and Horace Wilson as well as Cadogan.⁵ The person from whom most difficulty might have been expected was the First Lord of the Admiralty, and on 9 October he sent Chamberlain a draft reply of his own, to replace Halifax's which he felt was too long and defensive. Churchill wrote:

"It is in the morrow of this grievous crime in European

¹Prem 1/395., 9th Oct.

²Chamberlain letter to sisters, 15th Oct. NC 18/1/1125.

³Prem 1/395, 8th Oct. Minute by Vansittart.

⁴Gilbert, p.56; Prem 1/395, 9th Oct.

⁵Cadogan Diaries, 9th Oct, p.223.

History that Herr Hitler has returned in triumph from Warsaw to make what is described as "a peace offer" to the allies of Poland in the West".

And continued of the Allies position that:

"They can play no part in any parley until reparation has been offered, to the states and people who have been so wrongfully conquered, and their effective life and sovereignty is unmistakably to be restored".¹

This more strident line was not to be the beginning of a Cabinet split as Churchill prefaced his draft with a note to Chamberlain which said that its purpose was "to embody almost all the points made in the larger draft, does not close the door upon any genuine peace offer, and does not commit us to any territorial arrangement". Given that Churchill was not attempting merely to gain time with his reply, it must therefore be concluded that the main difference was of style, tone and outlook upon a similar problem. Churchill did "not close the door upon any genuine offer", but was adamant that Hitler's terms were impossible to proceed upon. These views he reinforced in Cabinet on 9 October when he said it was "no use holding discussions with Herr Hitler until he showed by his actions that his policy had changed".² This is a neat précis of the Government's consensus opinion - not excluding the First Lord's - i.e. that Hitler's terms were unacceptable and that Britain must wait until his actions proved that his policy had changed. Thus on this evidence it appears that it was Hitler's failure to prove that he had abandoned an aggressive foreign policy which was the cause of the continuation of war rather than merely the fact that he was still in power in Germany. Where Churchill appears to have differed

¹Prem 1/395, 9th Oct. Churchill to Chamberlain. Draft reply to Hitler.

²All this is Gilbert, p.57; Cab 65/1, WM (39)42, 9th Oct.

was over the speed with which such a change of policy could be brought about and he was consequently less concerned about alienating Germany through the form or tone of the reply.

Apart from the contributions of the members of the drafting Committee, probably the most important input to the reply was that of R.A. Butler. On 10 October he produced his "personal effort" in reply to Hitler. As well as stating explicitly that Britain would, under conditions, "establish an alternative to the Versailles settlement", Butler concluded in the following way:

"Either Germany must give convincing proof of the security of her desire for peace by definite acts, by the provision of effective guarantees of her intention to fulfil her undertakings, or we must persevere in our duty to the end. It is for Germany to make her choice".¹

This was very largely the form of the reply given by Chamberlain two days later.² For those whose desire to see the answer of a negotiated settlement explored further, Butler's intervention offered a ray of hope. "Chips" Channon expressed this clearly in his diary for 11 October. The Government, he noted, had decided to make "almost but not quite, a definite refusal of Hitler's terms", but Butler "has however succeeded in keeping the door slightly ajar".³

At the completion of the drafting process there was general satisfaction within the Government as to the form of the reply. Euan Wallace, Minister of Transport, concluded "that it would be impossible to improve upon it. It bears every evidence of the collective mind of the best brains in the Cabinet".⁴ Neville Chamberlain was more modest, writing to his sister that it had been "amended and polished and improved

¹Prem 1/395, 10th Oct.

²See Chamberlain's speech. Hansard, 12th Oct., Vol.352, Cols.563-568.

³Channon Diary, 11th Oct, p.223.

⁴Wallace Diary, 11th Oct. Mss Eng Hist. c 495.

again and again", until even Churchill "was delighted with it".¹

Before the reply was given, as well as the need to produce a draft satisfactory to the Cabinet, the responses of the Dominions had to be taken into account, and this process created a considerable amount of difficulty.²

On 10 October, the Cabinet had its first opportunity to discuss the Dominions' reactions to the initial comments on Hitler's speech sent to them earlier.³ Eden summed up their feelings by telling his Cabinet colleagues that there was a general concern "that the draft went too far in the direction of "slamming the door" on further discussion, instead of putting questions that Herr Hitler would have to answer".⁴ Yet Eden did not foresee "any difficulty in obtaining the agreement of the Dominions, except perhaps in the case of Canada".

The issue of the Canadian attitude was one which could have caused an embarrassing - to say the least - reverberation in Britain, Canada and the United States. In reply to the British Government's request for comments on how to answer Hitler, Mackenzie King's administration's attitude was clear. Although they concurred that Hitler's want of veracity and consistency presented a major obstacle, the Canadians desired that the reply state positively both Britain's war aims and views on "the conditions on the procedure upon which the United Kingdom Government consider the war might now be terminated".⁵ Neither of these was

¹Chamberlain's Papers. Letters to sisters, 15th Oct. NC 18/1/1125. Also: "I must say Winston was most helpful ... in the end although he thought the speech might be criticised for not being sharp enough (which it was not) he was delighted with it". Attlee was also consulted. Prem 1/395, 12th Oct.; Templewood Diary, 11th Oct.; Vol. XI/2.

²Templewood Diary, 11th Oct., reads "W/C [War Cabinet] final draft of PM's statement. Difficulty with the Dominions". Vol. XI/2.

³Cab 21/952, folios 225-6, 6th Oct.

⁴Cab 65/1, WM (39) 43, 10th Oct. Particularly with New Zealand and Canada. The former writing - Prem 1/395, 11th Oct. - that "no door should even at present juncture be closed that might lead to a peaceful solution whether by international conference or any other feasible means".

⁵Prem 1/395, 11th Oct. Telegrams from the other Dominions are also in this file.

Chamberlain prepared to do. Before discussing "the case of Canada", Lord Halifax expressed scepticism about it proving possible to not "slam the door" without simultaneously implying that "Hitler's speech did, in fact, offer a fair basis for discussion". This conundrum, as noted earlier in this chapter, was overcome by the Prime Minister's effective separation of the terms Hitler had offered from the idea of Germany being invited to pursue the path of peace by proving her enthusiasm for it.

As well as the discussions and influences already referred to, the Government was influenced by two clandestine contacts with the Swede Dahlerus and von Papen referred to earlier. At least, to influence the Chamberlain Government was their intent, although in this they were singularly unsuccessful. Prior to the delivery of Hitler's speech, Dahlerus had reported that he was hoping to secure consideration for the British point of view. When Hitler's words proved that his attempt had been futile, Dahlerus remained unperturbed. The following day he was still "trying to obtain clear proposals from the German Government which will meet the views expressed to him in London".¹ On 9 October he was "a little more hopeful" and reported that "proposals are being considered by the German Government".² This was noted by the War Cabinet on 10 October, although the Foreign Secretary's report showed no hint of either hope or enthusiasm.³

Dahlerus' activities, vague and intangible though they were, reached some sort of climax when on 11 October he presented the British Minister at The Hague with what purported to be the latest proposals of the German Government. Yet even then this was only done verbally with nothing in writing. These were an amplification of some of the points

¹FO 800/317, H/XV/311. *Report of Dahlerus' phone conversation with British Embassy at the Hague, 7th Oct.*

²FO 800/317, H/XV/318, 9th Oct.

³Cab 65/3, WM(39)43, Minute 12, "The War Cabinet took note of the above statement". 9th Oct.

of Hitler's speech. The salient points were reported to London by the Minister.

There was to be a meeting of belligerent representatives as soon as possible to draw up the basis for a conference followed by an armistice during the conference session. The most interesting aspects relate to the vexed question of the future of Poland and of the guarantees for peace. On Poland there was to be a "new Polish State within German orbit. Extent of territory to be considered but that of Soviet occupation not subject to discussion". On the issue of guarantees, it was suggested that any "agreement reached at conference would be endorsed by national plebiscite in Germany and other powers would obtain national approval in some similar form". The "Proposals" ended by saying "If HMG are not prepared to negotiate with present regime in Germany proposals fall to the ground".¹ Whatever else can be made of the Dahlerus affair, it was singularly ineffective in changing the Government's reply to Hitler's speech. Alec Cadogan's diary comment of Dahlerus on 11 October was "I think he has nothing, and this confirmed by telegram just received. If we insist on change of regime in Germany, nothing doing. Then nothing is doing ..."²

On 15 October the Cabinet discussed, fairly briefly, the correspondence with Dahlerus. In Halifax's position the main utility of this derived from "the evidence which it afforded as to the mentality of the German Government, who appeared still to consider that the discussion of peace terms was possible". To which the Prime Minister added that there was also merit in the fact that, if Dahlerus' advances became known, it "would be of assistance in meeting the criticism of those

¹ FO 800/317, H/XV/317, 11th Oct. The next day, H/XV/323, Dahlerus elaborated the plebiscite idea: "Plebiscite proposal would include replies to three questions" the Minister at The Hague reported, namely are you in favour of peace, are you in favour of building up Europe in collaboration with England and France, do you as individuals guarantee on your honour the boundaries of other nations and non-aggression pacts".

² Cadogan Diaries, 11th Oct. The telegram referred to is FO 800/317 H/XV/322. Cadogan's impression was repeated on 12th Oct. when he wrote "what D has been able to send us is useless". Both p. 223.

persons who thought that the attitude which we had taken towards Germany was too unbending".¹

After discussion in Cabinet, the Foreign Secretary sent an agreed reply to Dahlerus, via Sir Neville Bland in The Hague², and arranged to see the French Ambassador so that Paris would be fully informed. When reporting this to his colleagues, Halifax defended the continuing contacts with Dahlerus from Hore-Belisha's criticism by stressing that it was clearly of advantage "to tell the German Government, through a channel in which they had confidence, that in fact our attitude was precisely as stated by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons".³

The reply sent to Dahlerus, agreed at the above-mentioned Cabinet meeting, shows both the position of the Government towards German peace-feelers and the finality of Chamberlain's statement of 12 October. Any proposals would have to be in writing, so as to allow full consideration and "confidential consultations" with the French and until such were received there was no point in Dahlerus continuing his enquiries. As regards the criteria which would have to be met by any proposals, Dahlerus was informed that:

"Position of HMG was made plain by Prime Minister's statement in the House of Commons on Thursday last which invited Germany to make proposals for establishing convictions of her sincerity".⁴

Chamberlain's speech of 12 October thus represented not merely the public face of Government policy, but its inner heart as well. However before a full discussion of this speech, mention needs to be made of the activities of the former Reich Chancellor, von Papen.

¹Cab 65/3, WM(39)48, Minute 8, 15th Oct.

²Cab 65/3, WM(39)45, 15th Oct.

³Cab 65/3, WM(39)49, Minute 12, 15th Oct. The Prime Minister's speech referred to is that of 12th Oct.

⁴FO 800/317. H/XV/327, 15th Oct. FO to The Hague.

The best source for viewing the impact of von Papen's messages through the British Ambassador to Turkey is the letters of the Prime Minister to his sisters. On 8 October he wrote that von Papen had communicated possible "terms of peace which von Papen says Hitler knows of" which included the abdication of Hitler, an independent Poland and Czechoslovakia, disarmament and agreements on trade. In short all the British Government hoped for. Chamberlain's subsequent speculation on the importance of von Papen's communications is of great interest and worth quoting at length:

"How much weight must we give to all this? One's first instinct is this is too good to be true. And probably that is so. Yet there may be some truth in it. Personally I don't see Hitler ever agreeing to such terms. He might play with the idea of abdication but in the end he would I believe always reject it. And I would prefer that he did because the best safeguard against his return would be the existence of people who had pushed him out and would lose their heads if he came back".

Although Chamberlain's willingness to see the possibility of Hitler's overthrow or even "abdication" appears rather wishful, it is clear that the problem is seen as relating it to Hitler's personal position, rather than as regards the acceptability of terms such as the nature of an independent Poland. Von Papen's proposals,¹ or indeed anybody's proposals, had no effect on the conduct of the war. The Prime Minister's letter added; "My policy continues to be the same: Hold on tight, keep up the economic pressure, push on with munitions production and with military preparations with the utmost energy, take no offensive unless

¹Chamberlain Papers. On 15th Oct. he wrote again to his sisters that "It remains for Von Papen to see what he can do but I have never counted on him for much". NC 18/1/1125.

Hitler happens to bring it". It was not that the war was being kept "phoney" because of the chance of peace, but that the present policy was one which would be most likely to produce peace. In Chamberlain's words; "I reckon that if we are allowed to carry on this policy we shall have won the war by the Spring".¹

The Prime Minister's reply to Hitler's speech of 6 October was delivered to the House of Commons on the afternoon of 12 October. For the first time since the outbreak of the war the Government's position on the crucial questions of war aims and a negotiated peace was set out. After outlining pre-war attempts at mediation by the United States, the Pope, Belgium, The Netherlands and Italy, Chamberlain set the scene by reminding his listeners that "It is after this wanton act of aggression, which has cost so many Polish and German lives, sacrificed to satisfy his own insistence on the use of force, that the German Chancellor now puts forward his proposals". However, no attempt had been made to "make amends for this grievous crime against humanity", and of Hitler's suggestion that "the certainty of European security" could be based upon "recognition of his conquests and his right to do what he pleases with the conquered", the Prime Minister repeated that it would be impossible for Great Britain to accept any such bases". To do so would be to forfeit both honour and the principle of the settlement of disputes by discussion rather than force. Such considerations were not, however, the most important. After a long recitation of Hitler's broken promises, Chamberlain highlighted "the fundamental difficulty" with Hitler's speech. This was that "after our past experience, it is no longer possible to rely upon the unsupported word of the present German Government". Thus this question of the guarantees of any agreement was the central one which will be fully considered later, although in passing one can

¹*Chamberlain Papers. Letters to sisters, 8th Oct. NC 18/1/1124.*

see that it was again suggested that it was not Hitler's word which was the stumbling block, but his "unsupported word".

Having outlined both the background and major difficulty inherent in Hitler's speech, Chamberlain proceeded to explain exactly how the Government viewed the position of Germany in a future settlement and the idea of a negotiated peace at some stage in the future. There was no desire to "exclude from her rightful place in Europe a Germany which will live in amity and confidence with other nations". Moreover, the Government felt "that the future would hold little hope unless such a settlement could be reached through the method of negotiation and agreement". There was no "vindictive purpose" behind Britain's policy said the Prime Minister, and they desired "nothing from the German people which should offend their self-respect". In his final remarks on this subject, Chamberlain sought to lay the ghost of Versailles to rest in the following way:

"We are not aiming only at victory, but rather looking beyond it to the laying of a foundation of a better international system which will mean that war is not to be the inevitable lot of each succeeding generation".

There was then no desire to crush Germany or to defeat the people of Germany, who, he asserted, still longed for peace. The only obstacle to peace on Britain's terms was not the need for prior military victory, instead it was political; "It is the German Government, and the German Government alone". It was not Germany's strength that they were fighting but her will.

This was the British position as regards a negotiated peace with Germany, but when it came to the reaction to Hitler's specific terms, their attitude can be summed up as follows: "Peace conditions cannot be acceptable which begin by condoning aggression"; Hitler's "vague and uncertain" proposals are deficient as they do not envisage "righting the

wrongs done to Czechoslovakia and Poland"; and, even if they were more closely defined so that the "wrongs" done to other countries were corrected, "it would still be necessary to ask by what practical means . the German Government intend to convince the world that aggression will cease and that pledges will be kept". Of these three points, Chamberlain left the world clear about which was the most significant. This was that "acts - not words alone - must be forthcoming" before the war could be ended.

The Prime Minister's concluding paragraph again spelt out the Government's overriding consideration:

"There is thus a primary condition to be satisfied.

Only the German Government can fulfil it. If they will not, there can as yet be no new or better world order of the kind for which all nations yearn.

The issue is therefore plain. Either the German Government must give convincing proof of the sincerity of their desire for peace by definite acts and by the provision of effective guarantees of their intention to fulfil their undertakings or we must persevere in our duty to the end. It is for Germany to make her choice".¹

Although the British position was made abundantly clear by this statement, it is also obvious that this position left a number of crucial questions unanswered. For example, although it was for the "German Government" to give "convincing proof" - was that the existing German Government, a successor Government, or any German Government. If

¹Hansard, Vol.352, Cols.563-8, 12th Oct. The speech lasted 18 minutes.

"definite acts" were to be required, of what nature ought these acts to be? And, how did the Government intend to respond if Hitler took things further and suggested specific terms and guarantees.

As might be expected, there was never a Cabinet discussion of whether guaranteeing acts by the present German Government were acceptable. Sir John Simon, who was not one of the drafters of the speech, found it virtually impossible to imagine that the existing Government would provide what was necessary.¹ Were this generally held to be the case, then there was no real purpose in not making this clear. However, the Prime Minister's only reference to this point on 12 October, in a telegram to Dominion Prime Ministers, gives another picture entirely. In this, Chamberlain refers three times to the possibility of the existing German Government negotiating a settlement. This telegram is central to a proper understanding of the Government's position. It read:

"If, on the other hand, as we believe may well be the case, the German Chancellor is hesitant, then we believe that the form of words that we have chosen, which does not too precisely define our terms, gives him the best possible opportunity for taking the next step."

"If ... the German Government have not yet closed their minds to the possibility of negotiation, Herr Hitler may be expected to reply to our statement."

"In other words, if Herr Hitler wants to negotiate we have given him the chance to do so."²

¹*Simon Diary, 13th Oct. Mss Simon 11.*

²*Cab 21/952, 12th Oct. [Underlining mine] To Dominions.*

Therefore, whatever their views on the probability of successful negotiation with the existing German regime, and this was remote in the extreme, no specific prohibition was placed upon it. Indeed, the reverse was the case; they had given Hitler the chance. The guarantee required could be provided by Hitler's Government; whether they were disposed to would become evident by their response.

As far as further definition of what sort of acts would be required as either evidence of intent or as a guarantee, the Prime Minister would not be drawn, replying to a Parliamentary question by saying "I have nothing at present to add to the full and considered statement which I made on 12 October".¹ There was similar reluctance to be exact when it came to defining peace terms, with Sir John Simon being of the opinion that "too much geographical precision on this subject would be most inadvisable".² There had been careful consideration of whether to put forward such precise "conditions upon which we should be prepared to negotiate with Germany", but it was concluded "dangerous at this stage to go further than we have".³ If, however, Hitler's reply was in any way favourable, that would be the time to "consider whether we can usefully and profitably carry the definition of our war aims a stage further".⁴ Therefore, clarification of war aims was dependent upon the possibilities of negotiation, as only then would the circumstances surrounding the peace be known. Once enunciated, peace terms were difficult to withdraw. Therefore, no attempt was made to fix terms for an unknowable situation.

Britain's war aims would not be fixed until the German Government showed some willingness to consider negotiation. Chamberlain's speech

¹Hansard, Vol.352, Col.677, 17th Oct. In reply to Mr Mander's asking whether the precondition for peace talks was the German evacuation of Poland and Czechoslovakia.

²Simon Diary, 13th Oct., Mss Simon 11.

³Cab 21/952, 12th Oct. Telegram to Dominions. Part of the reason for this being that "exact conditions" may actually hinder a progression towards peace.

⁴Ibid.

was "so phrased as to give Hitler an opportunity"¹ for this willingness to be demonstrated. The Cabinet minutes for 12 October² show that this was the "main object" of the drafters of the Prime Minister's reply, and that they felt that "there were points in the statement which Herr Hitler could seize on if his real desire was peace". Were Hitler's desire not for peace, which was the most likely position, then the reaction to Chamberlain's speech would soon reveal it. At least "if Herr Hitler wants to negotiate we have given him the chance to do so".³

Reaction within Britain to Chamberlain's reply to Hitler was, as would have been expected, generally favourable. The Daily Telegraph leading article echoed the Prime Minister's theme⁴ and Geoffrey Dawson thought it "an admirable statement very well received by the House".⁵ To many it was the emphasis on Hitler having to choose that was the central feature. "Chips" Channon, expressing as the feelings of the House of Commons what were more probably his own sentiments, recorded that Members were "half hoping for peace, but determined on war".⁶ Euan Wallace noted that Chamberlain "carried the whole House" and that "it now only remains to be seen what Hitler is going to do about it".⁷

The important question was indeed, how Hitler would react. Both Churchill and Hankey expected a violent reaction with the latter urging his wife not to come to London, "in case Hitler replies to Chamberlain's refusal of his so-called peace offer by trying to bomb London".⁸ The Prime Minister did not disagree with this gloomy outlook, writing that "I never thought Hitler would answer my questions and offer guarantees".⁹ As well as providing further evidence for the contention that Chamberlain

¹*Simon Diary*, 13th Oct., Mss Simon 11.

²Cab 65/1, WM (39) 45, 12th Oct.

³Cab 21/952, 12th Oct.

⁴Daily Telegraph, leading article, 13th Oct.

⁵*Dawson Diary*, 12th Oct. Mss Dawson 43.

⁶*Channon Diary*, 12th Oct, p.223.

⁷*Wallace Diary*, 12th Oct. Mss Eng Hist. c 495.

⁸*Hankey Papers*, HNKY3/43. Letter to wife, 12th Oct.

⁹Chamberlain letter to sisters, 15th Oct. NC 18/1/1125.

would have negotiated with Hitler, the Prime Minister continued of German reactions to his statement, "the disappointment must have been great and the fury unrestrained".

Yet no conclusion could be drawn until the German reaction had been ascertained. Later, on 12 October, the intermediary Dahlerus gave two sides of the German reaction, or at least of what the Germans wished their reaction to be seen as. Cadogan noted a request for "guidance"¹ about Chamberlain's statement, which was met with the response that it was clear enough already. Then the British Ambassador to The Hague was informed that "the German Government would not answer PM's statement, which was a declaration of war".² However, Halifax still felt "that he was not in a position to make any definite report"³ of Germany's reaction. A day later the position was, if anything, less clear, with Dahlerus reporting that after a two-hour talk with Goering the "atmosphere ... more hopeful".⁴ The reason for this being that Germany may really be "in a tight corner" - something which neither Cadogan nor Halifax were prepared to exclude. While Chamberlain shared the Foreign Office's belief in German difficulties, he no longer counted on the information of Dahlerus or von Papen to be of much value.⁵

What then can be concluded about Hitler's peace offer and Chamberlain's reply? Firstly, that whatever the sincerity of Hitler's motives, it was treated as a serious statement of the German position and replied to as such. This is in marked contrast to the contempt shown for Hitler's next "peace offer" - in July 1940. Secondly, for the purposes of this thesis, the crucial importance was that it forced the discussion, although not the full elucidation, of the Government's war aims and attitudes towards a negotiated peace with Hitler. On 15 October, the main aspects

¹*Cadogan Diaries*, 12th Oct, p.223.

²*Cadogan Diaries*, 13th Oct, p.224.

³*Cab 65/1, WM (39) 47*, 14th Oct.

⁴*Cab 65/3, WM(39)48*, 15th Oct.; *Cadogan Diaries*, 15th Oct, p.224.

⁵*Chamberlain letter to sisters*, 15th Oct. NC 18/1/1125.

of the Government's position were repeated to Dahlerus.¹ These were: that "Germany" should convince the allies of her sincere desire to obtain and maintain peace; that if the "German Government" have definite proposals, they should be submitted in writing so that Britain and France can "consider them"; and that there was little point in further diplomatic moves, through intermediaries or otherwise, until they had been able to judge the "value of any proposals German Gov't may wish to make". Were these steps taken then peace, even peace with Hitler, was possible. Without them, war was to continue.

¹FO 800/317, H/XV/327, 15th Oct.

CHAPTER 4

PEACE AND MEDIATION PROPOSALS, OCTOBER 1939 TO APRIL 1940

Chamberlain's firm reply to Hitler's peace speech seemed to have been a full stop in the progress of any peace negotiations. To Lloyd George, it was now necessary to "dismiss the hope that was engendered in many breasts that peace talks on an international scale might be arranged to avert the impending horror".¹ For Robert Boothby MP the necessary "destruction of the Nazi regime",² could no longer be achieved by a peace conference. And in the words of former early-peace supporter Conservative MP Sir Arnold Wilson, "I am now convinced that the issue between Germany and England must be fought out to a finish".³ As far as the Ministry of Information was concerned the task was now "To carry the masses in our refusal to accept Hitler's terms ...".⁴

The final attempt to keep up the momentum of the previous weeks was when Dahlerus requested further information on what proofs of sincerity and guarantees were required of the German Government.⁵ However, the British reply was to signal clearly that they wanted nothing to do with such questions. Dahlerus would have "no commission" to approach the German leaders as the attitude "of HMG was defined in Prime Minister's speech". If this meant that Dahlerus "found it impossible to continue his efforts, we could only accept the position and express our appreciation of what he had tried to do".⁶ Cadogan, who had drafted the above reply, regarded Dahlerus as "still bothering" and the answer sent had been designed to shut him up.⁷ This was very much the final British shot in a discussion about peace which had lasted most of October, and when Ribbentrop spoke at Danzig on the 26th it was felt that the Germans too had

¹ Lloyd George article, *Sunday Express*, 29th Oct.

All references in this chapter are to 1939 unless otherwise stated.

² Boothby Letter to Lloyd George, 31st Oct., Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 3.

³ *Sunday Express*, 22nd Oct.

⁴ Ministry of Information, "Memorandum on policy", 21st Oct., Inf 1/867.

⁵ FO 800/317, H/XV/331A, 18th Oct. Telegram from The Hague.

⁶ FO 800/317, H/XV/331C, 19th Oct. Reply to above.

⁷ Cadogan Diaries, 19th Oct, p.225.

terminated the exchanges.¹

What then was thought about the future of "this curious "shadow war""?² The Foreign Office thought that Chamberlain's "Firm reply to Hitler's speech seems to have surprised Berlin, where belief apparently lingered that we did not mean business". The telegram to Lord Lothian continued to mention rumours of differences of opinion in Berlin, of dislike of Russian power and despondency among the population. Nevertheless there appeared no sign of a real willingness to put forward acceptable terms for negotiation or of an early break in civilian morale.³ In this analysis such peace process as there had been had come to an end. While not disagreeing with this, Chamberlain wrote of the future "I anticipate a final peace offensive. From Hitler's point of view this seems much the most effective way of achieving his purpose which of course is to be able to get away with his conquests without a major war". Rather than the totally unprofitable course of active fighting, "he may try to wear us down by the effect of peace proposals acting on boredom and impatience"⁴ among allied populations. It therefore seemed that the Government was due to face more attempts to lead it to the conference table, as a new and different peace process began. This was seen to have begun as early as 16 October, when the French Ambassador told Halifax that "the French Government had had certain soundings, the precise nature of which he did not know, but which also went to confirm to some extent the impression that the German Government had not abandoned their efforts on the line of the "peace offensive"". ⁵

The objective of this chapter is to look at the peace moves which the British Government had to deal with from the end of October. It would

¹Simon Diary, 26th Oct. Mss Simon 11. "Ribbentrop's ridiculous speech at Danzig evidently marks the end of the German "peace offensive".

²Wallace Diary, 24th Oct. Mss Eng Hist. c 495.

³FO 800/310, 20th Oct. Telegram to Lothian on the European Situation "for your personal and confidential information".

⁴Chamberlain letter to sisters, 22nd Oct. NC 18/1/1126.

⁵FO 800/317, H/XV/329, 16th Oct. Discussion between Corbin and Halifax.

be wrong to overstate the unity of origin and intent of this series of very desperate events. However, it was generally seen within the Government that it was in Germany's interest to put forward or encourage peace proposals while the Allies held out until something acceptable was presented. Within this framework was the deeply rooted idea that some sort of covert plan or open offer could lead to an acceptable peace. It was with these two sorts of reasoning that the Cabinet approached the problem of how to react to any peace move.

The first real attempt to get the two sides talking took place on 7 November when the Queen of The Netherlands and the King of the Belgians sent a telegram to the heads of state of the belligerent powers, except Poland, offering them "our good offices" as intermediaries to examine if "a reasonable and well founded basis for an equitable peace" could be arrived at. They offered "by every means at our disposal ... and in a spirit of friendly understanding to ascertain the elements of an agreement to be arrived at", and concluded, "We hope that our offer will be accepted and that thus a first step will be taken towards the establishment of a durable peace".¹

After being informed of this, by the editor of The Times², Halifax's initial comments to the Cabinet the following day were that "his present feeling was that the best course would be to answer by reference to the statements already made regarding our attitude to a peace settlement", although careful consideration would be required. In the Foreign Secretary's view he doubted whether the approach had been made in conjunction with Germany; rather it was prompted by fear of her, which was why no communication had been addressed to Poland.³ This assessment of the monarchs' motives received broad agreement. Oliver Harvey wrote that it was because "Holland and Belgium ... now fear Germany is about

¹Prem 1/380, 7th Nov. Tel gram to the King.

²Dawson Diary, 7th Nov., Mss Dawson 43.

³Cab 65/2, WM (39)75, 8th Nov.

to invade them".¹ Chamberlain, while "much disgusted for I thought it was going to be very embarrassing to us" was relieved that "public opinion generally has taken it rather as a manoeuvre to prevent Hitler's attacking the Low Countries than as a serious peace move".² Cadogan described it as the "Leopold-Wilhelmina offensive".³ Reactions of those outside the Government were not always so unanimous. The Labour MPs George Lansbury and Richard Stokes sent a message to Queen Wilhelmina and King Leopold which said "On behalf of a group of Labour members of the British Parliament, we congratulate you for your continued efforts on behalf of peace".⁴ The Evening Standard leading article on 8 November, under the headline "Is it Peace?", concluded "Therefore no proposal to end this present conflict should be lightly rejected. Therefore we are ready to consider the plan put forward by Queen Wilhelmina of Holland and King Leopold of Belgium".⁵

There had been some concern about the effect the Belgian-Dutch offer would have on those people and countries which wanted to see an end to the war. Chamberlain's initial disgust at the move was prompted by concern over how "public opinion"⁶ would take it. Halifax felt that any reply would have to avoid Britain being placed "in the wrong in the eyes of the neutrals".⁷ In addition, it was also true that "we do not want to continue the war a day longer than is necessary if a satisfactory settlement can be obtained in another way".⁸ Therefore the reply would not be easy or straightforward as it was a potential trap for German propaganda to exploit.

As well as the considerations previously mentioned, there was a

¹Harvey Diary, 9th Nov. Add Mss 56395.

²Chamberlain letter to sisters, 12th Nov. NC 18/1/1131.

³Cadogan Diaries, 7th Nov, p.229.

⁴Stokes' Papers, Bodleian Library, Dep Stokes Box 19, 11th Nov.

⁵Evening Standard, 8th Nov.

⁶Chamberlain letter to sisters, 12th Nov. NC 18/1/1131.

⁷Cab 65/2, WM (39)75, 8th Nov.

⁸Cab 21/952, 9th Nov. Circular D No.71. Telegram to Dominion Prime Ministers from Chamberlain.

major argument against agreeing to any sort of preliminary discussion or meeting. This was stated clearly by the Foreign Secretary in mid-October when he wrote to Lord Elton that "a conference that got everyone talking, and introduced an atmosphere very unfavourable to the resumption of military effort would be a profound danger unless and until you were sure that you could get what you thought necessary for the peace of Europe out of it".¹ These arguments were repeated by Halifax in a letter to Lord Lytton on 11 November, when he "was very shy indeed of putting myself into a position of getting into a conference until I am sure how I am coming out".² This was an important condition and one which made the task of the mediator virtually impossible. The Government was perfectly willing for a conference to finalise the details of a peace, but it insisted on the main substance being clear beforehand.

After discussion with the Dominion Governments and liaison with the French, the Cabinet recommended that the King reply that while his Government "appreciate the spirit of your Majesty's offer" Europe's need to "be redeemed "from the perpetually recurring fear of German aggression and to "prevent for the future resort to force instead of to pacific means", must remain paramount. Therefore, the King's reply concluded, "Should your Majesty be able to communicate to me any proposals from Germany of such a character as to afford real prospects of achieving the purpose I have described above, I can say at once that my Governments would give them their most earnest consideration".³

The King's reply was a polite refusal to embark upon the road of mediation, yet it was a refusal designed to point the finger at a lack of acceptable terms, not at British intransigence. This was not just propaganda. As Chamberlain had said earlier he was quite willing to stop the war "if a satisfactory settlement can be obtained another way";⁴ an

¹FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/19, 19th Oct.

²FO 800/317, H/XV/344, 11th Nov.

³See Cab 65/2 WM(39)78 ANNEX, as amended in WM(39)79 Minute 12, on suggestion from Mackenzie King.

⁴Cab 21/952, 9th Nov., Circular D No.71.

idea he repeated in a letter of 14 November to Lord Darnley.¹ There was therefore nothing intrinsically wrong with Dutch-Belgian mediation, but on this occasion it did not offer a real prospect of acceptable terms. What the Government, and Chamberlain in particular, did object to was the obvious attempt of the Monarchs to gain a respite from their own fears of invasion by giving Germany the chance to make propaganda capital out of the British refusal to talk.

In the event, the whole episode was something of a one-week wonder, which was neither important enough or divisive enough for passions to be aroused. The main significance came to be preventing Germany exploiting the occasion for her own ends. Once the reply had been agreed Sir Roger Keyes was given a letter to take to King Leopold on Chamberlain's behalf. The aim of this appears to have been to soften still further the clear rejection of his mediation, as if war became active on the Western Front Belgium would have a vital role to play. Keyes, a personal friend of King Leopold, was originally empowered to say that Chamberlain would "heartily welcome any steps taken by you which might avert or even postpone the outbreak of active warfare".² This went much further than the text of the reply it accompanied and was, as Churchill objected, "nothing less than an authorisation from you to open another channel of negotiations with Hitler".³ Churchill's point of view was valid, if overstated, and when he challenged the Prime Minister on it the latter agreed to drop the contentious phrase. However, Chamberlain did this not because he recognised the strength of Churchill's argument, but because the whole matter was too unimportant to bother with. In the Prime Minister's words "I should not have thought that my draft would bear the interpretation you put upon it, but I don't attach any importance to the words I used as I am sure nothing could come of

¹Prem 1/443, 14th Nov.

²Prem 1/390, Nov., probably 18th. Draft agreed by Chamberlain.

³Prem 1/380, 18th Nov. Letter from Churchill to Chamberlain.

Leopold's efforts".¹ King Leopold was not seen as an important potential mediator but as a potential ally who it was important not to offend.

If the mediation offer by the Dutch and Belgians was largely received in terms of its possible propaganda impact, at the same time there was a highly secret series of contacts occupying Ministers' minds. The initial approaches were via Admiral Sinclair of SIS, and first appeared in Cadogan's Diary on 17 October.² These were the activities of certain "German Generals", although on 23 October Cadogan commented that he thought they were "Hitler agents".³ Five days later Chamberlain also passed comment when writing to his sisters of certain "behind the scenes" activity which was still undefined and not yet showing signs of offering anything "which would or could be acceptable to us".⁴ Yet the "increasing rumours of quarrels in Germany" certainly made Ministers look on with interest.⁵

The first official comment on the activities of the so-called German Generals was when Halifax felt it right to inform the French Ambassador, Corbin, about them. According to Halifax, "M. Corbin was quite satisfied with this, and I was glad to have had the opportunity of telling him, in quite general terms, that something was in the wind".⁶ Peter Ludlow has written that the conclusion that "the British were more generously disposed to overtures from the German opposition in this period than at any other time both before and after," still stands.⁷ This is indeed the case and is nowhere more applicable than over the affair of the German Generals. There was a willingness to look for "a reasonable peace" behind the backs of the German Government⁸ and a determination "to

¹Prem 1/380, 19th Nov. Chamberlain's reply to above.

²Cadogan Diaries, 17th Oct, p.224-5.

³Cadogan Diaries, 23rd Oct, p.226.

⁴Chamberlain letter to sisters, 28th Oct. NC 18/1/1128.

⁵Dawson Diary, Mss Dawson 43, 23rd Oct.

⁶FO 800/317, H/XV/337, 7th Nov.

⁷Ludlow "The Unwinding of Appeasement", op. cit. p.9.

⁸Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 3. Halifax to Tavistock, 31st Jan. 1940. referring to these events.

miss no opportunity of encouraging any elements of opposition".¹ This was fostered both by British desires to avoid an all out war which tended to cloud the Government's view at times and by a lingering belief in a "good old Germany" waiting in the wings.² This belief, or hope, was perhaps best outlined by Pownall who wrote that "The Army and monarchists, the Communists, Jews, Roman Catholics, Austrians, Czechs and Poles" all wanted to see Hitler removed on their own terms and "are in fact only kept from action by the Gestapo".³ There was therefore a desire to give the German opposition elements a chance to prove themselves. The German Generals appeared ready to do just that, and on 7 November Cadogan announced himself satisfied with how talks were progressing.⁴

With contacts continuing via the SIS with unnamed German representatives, there was inevitably a large degree of uncertainty. This was increased on 9 November when reports were received of a bomb in a Munich beer-cellar with Hitler the intended target. This was linked to arguments within Hitler's "most intimate circle",⁵ taken as "the signal for violent warfare"⁶ or - more intriguing still - as Oliver Harvey wrote, "Bomb outrage in Munich last night. Hitler narrowly escaped. Is this the work of 'the generals'?"⁷ Whatever the real reason, it helped to add a further wave of intrigue to the developing contacts. As Cadogan had said earlier "There's something going on in Germany. That's about all one can say".⁸

The most important question about the contact with the "Generals" was that of how far the Government were prepared to go in accommodating their terms. Firstly, it is clear that they were discussed at the

¹FO 800/317, H/XV/337, 7th Nov.

²An idea ridiculed by Hugh Dalton, *Diaries*, Part 1/21, 18th Oct.

³Pownall Diary, 17th Nov.

⁴Cadogan Diaries, 7th Nov, p.229.

⁵Simon Diary, 9th Nov. Mss Simon 11.

⁶Dawson Diary, Mss Dawson 43, 9th Nov.

⁷Harvey Diary, 9th Nov. Add Mss 56395.

⁸Cadogan Diaries, 31st Oct, p.228.

highest level; Cadogan's diary entries for 24,¹ 28 and 30 October describe discussions with Halifax and Chamberlain about the replies to be sent. Secondly, the line adopted was broadly similar to that given to Dahlerus,² but in addition, the "Generals" presented a further problem. Any agreement with them was irrelevant unless they took power, and there was little confidence that they were prepared to do this. As Harvey noted "Anyway I don't believe any of these elements will do anything. They expect us to fight their battles for them".³ Nevertheless, the purported proposals of the German representatives were very seriously considered, and the most detailed of these which is available was a telegram which formed the basis of a "private talk with Daladier" on 31 October. Briefly, the "German representatives" who promised "further details of their party in the near future", declared that: The Wehrmacht had the upper hand in Germany and was prepared "to take a leading part in formation of a new Government" with only Goering remaining in office, although Hitler would be the nominal head of state; Germany would then be returned to "peaceful friendly tranquil relations with the world" with "all civilised countries" helping in her transference from a war to a peace footing. If the allies agreed, negotiations would be through "the representative of one of the old Royal Houses (other than Hohenzollern or Hapsburg), or a person of similar standing; during negotiations, the army would ensure that "military inactivity" continued."⁴

Although there had been no attempt to initiate the discussion with elements opposed to Hitler, when approached by the "Generals" the British agreed that representatives should meet on the Dutch border. Clearly, the Government wished to see whether these contacts, which they had taken

¹Cadogan's Diary for 24th Oct. reads, "C's German's have put 2 questions and I discussed with H [Halifax] answer to give to them and subsequently drafted it ... Showed H my draft reply to Germans, which he approved. We went over to PM with it at 6.30. He approved generally, with verbal alterations". Cadogan Diaries, p.226.

²Cadogan Diaries, 28th Oct, p.227.

³Harvey Diary, 1st Nov. Add Mss 56395.

⁴Chamberlain Papers, NC8/29/1, 31st Oct.

seriously, could produce serious results. Consequently, the SIS officers Stevens and Best were instructed to meet the German representatives on 9 November. Simon records the events which followed: "The Gestapo have kidnapped two Englishmen just over the Dutch border ... who were going to meet some Germans who professed to be representing a discontented element in the German army". Oliver Harvey described Best and Stevens being "shot and dragged back into Germany", while Cadogan noted "Our men who met, or were to have met, Gen. yesterday bumped off on Dutch German frontier".¹ Chamberlain concluded on 12 November that another plan had "gone wrong", but three days later another message from the "Generals" arrived saying that they were alive and unaware of the frontier incident. For a week it remained unclear what had taken place, apart from the kidnapping of the SIS men, but on 22 November Cadogan was finally forced to recognise that the "Gestapo have taken over (if they did not always have!) our communications with the "Generals". So that's over!"² This was the first time the word Generals had been put within inverted commas, indicating that it was only at this late date that they considered it quite likely that the Gestapo "had invented the whole thing from the beginning"³ which, Simon added, "they had a perfect right to do".

The discussions with the "Generals" had been conducted in all seriousness and, it appears, with the expectation that they could have led to peace, but the Venlo kidnapping brought a new air of scepticism into the Government's thinking. There was, in Vansittart's words, "always too much "jam tomorrow" about "the Generals".⁴ Halifax and Chamberlain had begun to reassess their attitudes more fundamentally. Before Venlo, they appeared willing to accept that a combination of anti-Hitler elements in which the army was closely involved could fairly

¹Simon Diary, 27th Nov. Mss Simon 11; Harvey Diary, 11th Nov. Add Mss 56395; Cadogan Diaries, 10th Nov, p.230.; Chamberlain letter to sisters, NC 18/1/1131.

²Cadogan Diaries, 22nd Nov. p.223.

³Simon Diary, 27th Nov. Mss Simon 11.

⁴FO 371/24405 c 2524/89/18, 14th Feb 1940.

quickly effect a coup d'etat which would lead to a negotiated peace. Venlo appeared to disabuse them of this idea. Despite the deep divisions held to exist within Germany, Halifax wrote to Lothian that while some contacts "hint at plans for a change of regime" he was "doubtful whether this can materialise until Germany is feeling the pressure much more severely, either through lack of supplies or owing to military reverses".¹ Chamberlain put things more succinctly. When discussing opponents to Hitler he wrote to his sisters, who were usually the recipients of his innermost thoughts, "I am beginning to wonder whether we shall do any good with them unless they first get a real hard punch in the stomach".²

From the end of November, peace moves of whatever nature were viewed with a greater scepticism, or realism, than before. It was only those which offered a real chance of overthrowing Hitler which mattered, and until the reality of their intentions in this regard had been established, they were held very much at arms length. In Halifax's words, the Government was "almost daily the recipients of peace "feelers" from various quarters in Germany", without any of them producing "any positive proposals".³ In February, Cadogan complained that it "was about the 100th time" he had heard the story of an opposition ready to overthrow Hitler. The next day Halifax talked of "perpetually being asked about Britain's response in the event of a coup d'etat". The Foreign Secretary clearly suspected such feelers were being deliberately put out by the German Government, and yet "they came from far too many quarters to be dismissed altogether".⁴

Despite the numbers of peace feelers from within Germany, their overall impact was considerably less than earlier. With the slightly

¹FO 800/311, H/XIV/395, 21st Nov.

²Chamberlain letter to sisters, 3rd Dec. NC 18/1/133A.

³FO 800/311, H/XIV/395, 21st Nov.

⁴Cadogan Diary, ACAD 1/9, 28th Feb, 1940.; Halifax to Meeting of Ministers, FO 800/321, H/XXIII/7, 29th Feb. 1940.

more sceptical approach which followed Venlo, Chamberlain did not feel that the approaches showed "any progress towards the realisation that the game was up".¹ Despite the stories of unrest and impending collapse,² or perhaps because so many had already been proved wrong, the Prime Minister came to the painful conclusion by the end of November that the German people "are still devoted to Hitler".³ And in Cadogan's view "all the stuff we get is put out by the Germans, just out to puzzle us! After all, that's what we do".⁴ Therefore, although the Government always kept an ear open for anything genuine, particularly if it came through or from another Government, their attitude towards peace feelers was well summed up by Cadogan when he wrote on 14 December, "Let them get on with it, and I will then render my judgement".⁵

When it comes to classifying the kinds of peace feeler which were made, the first category is those carried over from the first two months of the war.

Von Papen's manoeuvres left the British Government guessing, but although it was clear that he was broadly opposed to Hitler, it was not clear whether he any longer had any influence.⁶ Although von Papen remained in the background for several months, it was clear that "he no longer cuts any ice in Germany and could not shift Hitler even if he wanted to". When this was added to his untrustworthiness,⁷ it was clear that the Government no longer expected anything useful to come from his advances. Dahlerus also continued to make approaches, at the end of October and in December, but again it was abundantly clear that he could

¹Chamberlain letter to sisters, 27th Jan. 1940. NC 18/1/1140.

²For example by Dr Goldman of the Jewish Agency in Geneva, reported to Cabinet on 23rd Nov., Cab 67/3. WP (G) (39)115.

³Chamberlain letter to sisters, 26th Nov. NC 18/1/1133.

⁴Cadogan Diary, 29th Nov. ACAD 1/8.

⁵Cadogan Diaries, 14th Dec, p.238.

⁶Chamberlain. NC 18/1/1126. 22nd Oct.; Knatchbull-Hugessen Diary, British Ambassador to Turkey, 19th Nov. Churchill College Cambridge.

⁷FO 371/24418 c3621/285/18, 20th March, 1940.

not deliver what the British required.¹

Although Hitler had not replied constructively to Chamberlain's 12 October speech, the Prime Minister still felt that "Hitler hasn't yet given up hope of peace on the basis that he retains his conquests and we give him some colonies". The next real expectation of a Hitler peace offer came, however,² in January when he spoke at the Berlin "Sportpalast" on 30th, which The Times reported in a 3,600-word extract.³ Not only did The Times expect that this would be a major speech, possibly containing a peace offer, but Halifax too anticipated he would have to begin preparing a reply for the Prime Minister to give as soon as possible. However, "it turns out that Hitler's speech is nothing but a mixture of boisterous whining and abuse, and all the experts are in agreement that he should take no notice of it", an assessment which found agreement in Cabinet.⁴ "As soon as I can see any reasonable hope of a change of spirit, I shall be ready to come forward half way" wrote Chamberlain two days later. "Till then I shall continue to recommend the country to fight as hard as it can".⁵

One person who was frequently put forward as someone who was of a sufficiently different spirit to enable the Allies to negotiate with him was Goering. He it was who Dahlerus had said was his contact and many others, for example James Mooney, Vice-President of General Motors,⁶ claimed to have his ear and be speaking his words. Yet after November, the name of Goering no longer guaranteed that a peace feeler would be taken seriously. Eventually he came to be considered in the same light as von Papen, "namely that Goering had not got the power to deliver the goods in Germany, that we were not satisfied that Goering was trust-

¹FO 371/24405, 14th Feb. 1940. Report of Dahlerus' activities. Also FO 800/317, H/XV/354,359 and 360.

²Chamberlain letter to sisters, 10th Dec. NC 18/1/1134.

³The Times, 31st Jan. This was the second longest report of a Hitler speech, only surpassed by the speech of 6th Oct.

⁴Halifax Diary, 31st Jan 1940. A7.8.3; Cab 65/5, WM (40) 28, 31st Jan 1940.

⁵Prem 1/443, 2nd Feb. 1940. Letter from Chamberlain to Lord Brockett.

⁶Cab 65/3, WM(39)61, 26th Oct.

worthy".¹

The contacts which may have held out the promise of results in the first two months of the war no longer did so by late November. Instead a whole range of others, generally less important but more varied, took their place. Amongst the feelers which came through unofficial sources were Dr Benes saying that the German Generals had submitted a repeat of the Ludendorf-Hindenburg memorandum, Rauschning who talked about a revolt in Germany, the Swede Bonde who said that "Goering definitely had in mind to get rid of Hitler", Dr Schacht, the Bishop of Oslo² and many others.

Far more significant were the peace feelers transmitted from or through foreign Governments. The first exchanges, which were watched with nervousness from London, occurred when on 23 December President Roosevelt wrote to the Pope about peace, on which the British Minister of the Vatican, Osborne, commented gloomily "I anticipate that sooner or later we may expect to find ourselves confronted by a Pope-President-Mussolini peace front, probably backed by the majority of the neutral world". This would indeed have been a dismal prospect, with one Foreign Office official noting "Is it possible that the democratic campaign (and perhaps a "third term") is to be floated on the tide of an American-Vatican peace offensive?"³ Much to the relief of the Foreign Office, this did not transpire, and neither did the fears that Mussolini would try to "seize any favourable opportunity" for making peace proposals.⁴

Since the beginning of the war, the British Government was fed with information from the Vatican, for example, when the British Minister Sir

¹FO 371/24406 c3537/89/18, 22nd Feb. 1940.

²Cab 65/11, WM (40) 1, 2nd Jan. 1940. ; Rauschning see Dalton Diary, Part I/21. mid-Nov.; for Bonde, FO 371/24405, 14th Dec.; for Schacht, Cab 66/4, WP(40) 6, 4th Jan.; for Bishop of Oslo, FO 800/322, H/XXXII/10 and 16, 15th Dec and 27th Jan. 1940.; For the industrialist Thyssen FO 800/318, H/XV/371, 14th Feb. 1940.

³FO 371/24405 c90/89/18, 2nd Jan. 1940.

⁴Cab 65/5, WM (40)3, 4th Jan. 1940. Halifax reporting to Cabinet.

Francis D'Arcy Osborne passed on a warning about the foolishness of predicting an early German collapse.¹ However, as Deutsch describes in great detail in "The Conspiracy against Hitler in the Twilight War",² a group of German opponents, having as their ultimate authority General Beck, devised a plan of enlisting Pope Pius XII to act as intermediary between them and the British Government. This was an arrangement favoured by the Pope, who according to one of his intermediaries, Father Leiber, felt that "The German Opposition must be heard in Britain".³ The agreed method was that Leiber would receive information from a German representative, and would then pass these usually short and specific questions via the Pope to Osborne, who would in turn forward them to London. Replies were returned in reverse along the same route. These were not really negotiations, more in the nature of information which might form the basis of negotiation. Soon after this network had been established, the Venlo affair threatened to put a stop to it, as the new mood of suspicion allegedly made Halifax ask "Your Holiness, can you be sure of the matter? Can we rely on this?" In the event, Deutsch asserts that a delay of five to six weeks occurred before communications began again and that this delay proved damaging or even fatal to the prospects of the exchanges.⁴

When the exchanges returned to their previous form in December, Osborne was told by the Pope that certain "German army chiefs" whose names were known to the Pope were prepared to "replace the present German Government by a "Verhandlungsfahige Regierung" - a government with which it was possible to negotiate - and then to reach settlement in Eastern Europe with the British Government".⁵ This was the Prime Minister's main objective so it should not be surprising that the approach was

¹Cab 67/3, WP(G)(39)115, 23rd Nov.

²Deutsch, ps.105-109 & 120-148.

³Ibid, p.120.

⁴Ibid, p.137.

⁵As Deutsch points out, on page 139, the communications only referred to Britain throughout.

taken seriously. However, there were many negatives. There was no assurance as to "the good faith of the principals" in Germany. Still less, obviously, could he guarantee that they could effect the change of government of which they spoke or that, even if they did so, they would be any more reliable than Hitler". As Osborne told the Pope the whole thing was "dangerously reminiscent of the Venlo affair" and that the "first step should be to effect the change of government and then talk peace".¹ On 17 January, Halifax raised the issue in Cabinet, which merely decided that "suitable steps" should be taken to inform the French Government of the approach.² On the 18th, Halifax described this approach as "on the usual line" and that it "did not appear to amount to anything much".³

As January ended, Deutsch writes that "the exchanges swept to their conclusion".⁴ On 7 February Osborne was summoned for another audience with the Pope, where as well as some more detail about the kind of government and peace negotiation desired, there was a request for "a British guarantee against dismemberment by France" and assurances that the Allies would not take advantage of a civil war in Germany resulting from a revolt.⁵ The reply to this was drafted by Sargent, but commented on by Chamberlain, and mentioned to the King before it was sent. Briefly, Halifax stated that the Pope should be informed of the British reaction to this latest message, and that this reaction could be transmitted to Germany. Firstly, nothing could be promised without consultation with the French, but this could not begin while the programme was "from undisclosed sources and so vague in character If progress is to be made, a definite programme must be submitted and authoritatively vouched for". Secondly, such definite terms should

¹FO 800/318, H/XV/363, 12th Jan. 1940.

²Cab 65/11, WM(39)16, 17th Jan. 1940.

³FO 800/321, H/XXII/3. Halifax to Meeting of Ministers. 18th Jan. 1940.

⁴Deutsch, p.146.

⁵FO 800/318, H/XV/390, 7th Feb. 1940.

include "reparation of the wrongs done to Germany's smaller neighbours" and, crucially, "security for the future".¹ The central question was still whether the "principals" in Germany were able to produce a change of Government or not, but among the proposals then being put forward, for example from Thyssen, the "message received through the Pope is the most circumstantial and inspires the most confidence".²

Before Osborne received Halifax's telegram of 17 February, he again saw the Pope who stressed that the Germans were waiting for the British response, to which Osborne observed again "if they wanted a change of government, why didn't they get on with it". This was, however, the one thing that the German intermediaries were not able to do, and without any real sign of this, the contacts were bound to wither through sterility. On 30 March, Osborne asked the Pope whether he had heard anything new from Germany, to which the Pope said that they had not.³

The contacts via the Pope were potentially the most important links with genuine opposition elements in Germany during the phoney war. Yet there was, in the wake of Venlo, a suspicious approach on the part of London which never really understood why the plotters did not at least try to overthrow Hitler. The requests for detailed knowledge of terms and promises not to attack on the western front during a coup were received with growing frustration at the Germans' preoccupation with secondary questions. It was not just Venlo which made the British Government cautious, but it was also the passage of time. The German "opposition" had cried "Wolf!" too often, and illusions were soon replaced with a more pragmatic approach. However, as the exchanges of 7th and 17th February showed, any serious proposals would be looked at although they would not be sought, but nothing could be taken further until and unless steps were taken to remove Hitler. The prospect of this

¹FO 800/318, H/XV/373, 17th Feb. 1940.

²FO 800/318, 17th Feb. 1940. *Memorandum on various peace feelers by Orme Sargent.*

³FO 800/318, H/XV/380, 3rd April. 1940.

happening became the acid test, and it was a test all the would-be plotters failed.

As during the first two months of the war, the overt and covert peace feelers were received in Whitehall against a background of continued support for peace among a small section of British society. Before Hitler spoke on 6 October, it was Lloyd George who appeared as the focus of an alternative war policy and in October alone he received about 2,700 letters advocating an early attempt at negotiation. Once the reply to Hitler had been given, however, Lloyd George sadly concluded that it was necessary to "dismiss the hope that was engendered in many breasts that peace talks on an international scale might be arranged to avert the impending horror".¹ Not even Victor Gollancz's offer to produce a booklet of his pro-peace speeches² could tempt the former Prime Minister to take up the crusade again and very soon the impetus was carried on by other figures. As a result it became both more confused and less potent.

On the political left, although Sir Stafford Cripps expressed his private doubts to Halifax about the wisdom of shunning a peace conference,³ the lead was provided by Richard Stokes, MP for Ipswich. In November he organised a petition signed by 20 Labour Members of Parliament which called for a declaration that Britain was ready to join in a genuine European conference,⁴ while in January the Sunday Express described him as the man who "may emerge as the leader of an agitation in Britain for a negotiated peace".⁵

On the other side of the political spectrum were men whose letters and ideas survive because of their titles rather than their influence, such as the Duke of Buccleuch and Lord Brockett.⁶ However, more important

¹Lloyd George article, Sunday Express, 29th Oct.

²Lloyd George Papers, 31st Oct., LG/G/Box 48.

³FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/31, 14th Oct. Memorandum by Halifax.

⁴Daily Telegraph, 11th Nov. The only Member of real note was George Lansbury.

⁵Sunday Express, 21st Jan. 1940.

⁶FO 800/328, Hal/39/45, 31st Oct.

or troublesome in the Government's eyes were the views of two rather idiosyncratic figures, Lord Beaverbrook and the Marquis of Tavistock, later Duke of Bedford.

The Foreign Office first became alerted to Beaverbrook's ideas when they received a report of him suggesting that the Duke of Windsor "stump the country" in the cause of peace, backed by "the Beaver Press".¹ In March, concern was sufficient for a file to be opened on his activities at the Foreign Office, which repeated the suggestion that he intended to "promote and finance a campaign in this country for a speedy peace", backed by, in Vansittart's words, the "Money-in-our-Time Brigade".² Although there is evidence that Beaverbrook thought like this and that he advocated an "Isolationist" stance,³ he could also write to Tavistock "I am a supporter of Mr Chamberlain, and I believe in his war policy".⁴ Lord Beaverbrook's position was enigmatic and, at times at least, he was clearly willing to talk in favour of an early peace. Nevertheless, although he gave publicity to such as Richard Stokes, he did not take any action to undermine the Government's war policy.

A figure whose position was much more highly defined was the Marquis of Tavistock. On 6 February, Tavistock wrote to Lord Ponsonby, another advocate of peace, saying that there was "a most important development which gives ground for a belief that the war could be immediately ended on reasonable terms, on which I have already been in touch with the Government".⁵ At a meeting later in the month, Tavistock told those gathered that proposals had been communicated through the German Minister in Dublin and the German Ambassador in Washington "were distinctly good but of course did not contemplate either the removal of

¹Harvey Papers, letter of 26th Jan. 1940 from Charles Peake, Add Mss 56401.

²FO 371/24363, 16th March. 1940.

³Beaverbrook Papers, Bbk D/405, 29th March. 1940. Letter to Stokes who he encouraged and offered to give publicity to.

⁴Beaverbrook Papers, BbkD/446, 8th March. 1940.

⁵Ponsonby Papers, Bodleian Library, Mss Eng Hist c 682, 6th Feb 1940.

Hitler or the Nazi Government".¹

Halifax's reaction, again according to Tavistock, was that this did not solve the problems of "untrustworthiness" and The Daily Telegraph was similarly unimpressed, "No one ought to be misled for a moment by Lord Tavistock's professedly official versions of "Germany's Peace Terms"" began the leading article comment on 2 January.² The previous day the most generous comment the Foreign Secretary could make was that "Tavistock had destroyed any value there may have been by allowing the publicity".³ Tavistock's brief intervention caused no lasting embarrassment and had no lasting effect. It was just an eccentric move by someone regarded as very much an eccentric.

Perhaps the final comment about the strength of public approval for the questions of discussing "peace proposals with Germany now" is contained in a British Institute of Public Opinion poll in February. This was a follow-up to a poll of the previous October and was conducted at a time when opinion surveys were an even less exact science than they are now. In October, in response to the question "Would you approve or disapprove if the British Government were to discuss peace proposals with Germany now?", asked as question seven out of ten, 29% said they would approve and 61% said they would disapprove. In October 1939 the figures had been 17 and 77%, respectively. No size of sample or exact survey dates were given in either case.⁴ The existence and apparent increase of opinion which was pro-negotiation even if not automatically pro-peace was something which the Government could not ignore as it framed its responses to peace feelers and enquiries, but to state it more strongly would be to give an undue importance to an unorganised minority view.

The most revealing enquiry about Britain's attitude towards a

¹*Ponsonby Papers, Mss Eng Hist c682, Tavistock report of meeting held in February 1940.*

²*Daily Telegraph, 2nd Jan. 1940.*

³*Ponsonby Papers, Mss Eng Hist c682, 1st March. 1940. Record of talk with Halifax.*

⁴*Gerald Barry Papers, BLPES, 8th March. 1940. Letter from Henry Durrant.*

negotiated settlement was that of Sumner Welles, United States Under Secretary of State, who visited Europe in the early spring of 1940. The idea of a United States peace feeler or offer to conduct a Conference was one which Ministers had included among the subjects of discussion at the beginning of 1940. Indeed, on 2 January Halifax described as "doubtful" the "policy and intention of President Roosevelt" regarding "a peace offensive".¹ At the end of the month new reports from Washington seemed to indicate "dangerous possibilities".² On 2 February these were crystallised by Roosevelt announcing to Lord Lothian that, in the latter's words, Sumner Welles was being sent to Europe on 17 February "in order to satisfy himself [Roosevelt] and public opinion here that every possibility of ending the war" had been followed up. Welles function was to "advise the President", not to make any proposals himself, and Roosevelt was "not hopeful" of any basis of agreement being found.³ To Cadogan this was an "awful, half-baked, idea"⁴ and the Prime Minister's view was similar. Although he was "gratified" that the President was aware of the need for "guarantees that there would be no renewal of aggression during any of our lifetimes", Chamberlain continued, "I must frankly admit to a good deal of anxiety lest the effect of this move, however carefully presented, should be to cause embarrassment to the Democracies, from which Germany, still unconvinced of the failure of the policy of force, will reap advantage" because of the pro-peace discussion it would engender in Allied capitals.⁵ This was immediately followed by a further telegram to Lothian for his private information where the Prime Minister expressed his opinion even more openly; "The misgivings we feel have been hinted at in my immediately

¹Cab 21/952, 2nd Jan. 1940. Halifax to Ambassador in Paris.

²FO 371/24405, c1528/89/18, 31st Jan. 1940.

³FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/45, 2nd Feb. 1940.

⁴Cadogan Diaries, 2nd Feb. 1940. p.250.

⁵FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/48, 4th Feb. 1940. Chamberlain to Lothian for him to leave with Roosevelt.

preceding telegram but we cannot help suspecting that what the President proposes to do is precisely what Hitler hoped he would do".¹ To Chamberlain's mind, it was a result of a combination of German intrigues and Ambassador Kennedy's promptings, a man who was described elsewhere as "a very foul specimen of a double crosser and defeatist".²

On 7 February, Lothian was able to report that the President appreciated many of the points raised and that in all probability the word "peace" mission would be avoided and the phrase "tour of enquiry" used instead. In an attempt to sweeten British opinion still further Welles "would be told to make it clear to Germany that any attack on France and Great Britain which showed any prospect of success would inevitably bring United States nearer to intervention".³ In response, Chamberlain expanded an argument previously mentioned, urging Lothian to "put frankly and fully to the President our anxiety concerning the effect which his proposal might have on our plans for saving Finland" and emphasise that the French thought likewise.⁴

Although Roosevelt was prepared to accommodate British dislike about the way Welles' mission might appear he was determined to proceed. It would be made clear that there was no "peace mission" involved and that the only objective would be to inform the President "as to present conditions in Europe".⁵ The prospects for peace were less than a thousand to one. Nevertheless, Welles' trip to Rome, Paris, Berlin and London was on. In public Welles would be welcomed as his visit "would assist the President to get a complete picture of the present situation", while privately Halifax and Chamberlain were "a little nervous of bad Peace Offensive".⁶

¹FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/49, 4th Feb. 1940.

²FO 371/24251, 22nd Jan. 1940. Comment from Vansittart and is therefore unsurprising, but by February even Halifax agreed.

³FO 800.324, H/XXXVII/50, 7th Feb. 1940. Lothian to Prime Minister.

⁴FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/51 & 52, 7th Feb. 1940.

⁵FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/54, 9th Feb. 1940.

⁶FO 371/24405, 10th Feb. 1940. Strang to Cambon; and Dawson Diary, Mss Dawson 44. 10th Feb. 1940.

Once the announcement had been made in Washington, Chamberlain told the House of Commons that Welles would be both welcomed and taken into British confidence, as had been previously agreed, but in his circular telegram to the Dominion Prime Ministers of 15 February, Chamberlain made clear his concerns about bringing "into open and vocal prominence those elements in public opinion in the Allied countries, unimportant though they may be, who wish to abandon the struggle".¹ It was with these misgivings, and with a determination to prove that the Allies would only agree to a guaranteed and lasting peace, that Welles was received.

The reaction of the British press to Welles' mission was also cautious. The Evening Standard of 10 February was the most outgoing, announcing "Mr Welles is Welcome", but this headline was followed by an article emphasising the need for security "not for a day or a year, but for many a year".² The Daily Telegraph similarly announced its greeting coupled with a statement about Britain's policy being "the only way to world peace". The next day it said Welles' mission was not "as a dove of peace" but "strictly as a secretary-bird" and Telegraph readers were warned³ of the weakness of US influence. Once Mr Welles arrived in Europe comment was brief and factual. The line was that Welles will have found "that the only way to peace is through the victory of the Allies".⁴ It is however to The Times that one ought to look for the reflection of how the Government wanted the US Under Secretary's visit to be treated. When Welles arrived in Rome at the start of his tour, the news did not warrant a leading article or a main headline. When he was in Berlin the bland headline "Mr Welles in Berlin" was not on the first column of the main news page. When American reaction was reported, it was the New York Times' comment that Hitler had not offered peace terms

¹FO 371/24405, 15th Feb. 1940. Circular Telegram 58 to Dominions.

²Evening Standard, 10th Feb. 1940.

³Daily Telegraph, 12th & 13th Feb. 1940.

⁴Daily Telegraph, 26th & 27th Feb. 1940.

but "war cries".¹ Throughout March there was no leading article on Welles and news of his visit took second, third or, usually, fourth place to stories of events from Finland. The only exception to this was on 18 March when Hitler and Mussolini met at the Brenner pass. In The Times, Welles was kept as a second-rate news item, superceded on nearly every occasion by events in Finland. When the Evening Standard did include comment, on 18 March, the headline was "Peace - And The Trap".² Evidence for the way The Times was deliberately keeping the Welles mission in a very low key can be found in the diary of its editor, Geoffrey Dawson. Extracts from his diary show a very different estimation of the situation from that presented by his newspaper. On 11 March he wrote "The diplomatic situation ... getting daily more confused and interesting. Sumner Welles seeing the PM and Edward in London. Ribbentrop in Rome". On 15 March he repeated the remark about "great diplomatic activity".³ The Welles visit was not the second-rate issue The Times tried to portray. It was a time of great activity and of considerable discussion of the Government's war aims and their attitudes towards a negotiated settlement. As R.A. Butler wrote on 12 February, "a more detailed statement of our war aims may conceivably arise in connection with the American Under-Secretary's visit".⁴ In the event no such statement was made, but the series of discussions provide an invaluable snap-shot of Government opinion.

In a preparatory meeting for the discussions with Welles, United States Ambassador Kennedy and Halifax laid out the position of both sides. Welles' purpose was "to place the President in a position to judge whether there was or was not any possibility of finding the way of settlement". While Kennedy was sure that his colleague appreciated that

¹The Times, 27th & 28th Feb.(Rome); 2nd March (Berlin); 5th March (New York Times); 18th March (Brenner Pass). All 1940.

²Evening Standard, 18th March. 1940.

³Dawson Diary, 11th & 15th March 1940, Mss Dawson 44.

⁴R.A. Butler Papers, RAB File 3/9, 12th Feb. 1940. Letter to Lord Perth.

"nobody here trusted Herr Hitler", the key question was "Was it, however, possible to devise anything on the lines of what he called mechanical guarantees, that would, in fact, deprive the German nation of the power to do this sort of thing again". On Halifax's part, he "begged the Ambassador to be under no illusion as to the absolute determination of this country not to be deceived into trusting any assurances by the present German Government" or that Britain would "accept any settlement that would not give us complete security ... against a recurrence of these events".¹

With the fundamental issues thus put forward, Halifax first met the United States envoy on the afternoon of 11th March and followed this with a further meeting in the evening which was also attended by Chamberlain and Kennedy. The matters relating to war aims are dealt with elsewhere.² For this chapter the important questions are those relating to the Government's views on a negotiated settlement. At Halifax's first meeting with Welles, he made it clear that the matters at issue with Germany were on the one hand political, relating to the status of Poland and Czechoslovakia and, on the other, ones of continuing security.³ In response, at the meeting later that day with the Prime Minister, the United States Under Secretary laid out, in Halifax's words, the "general outline of plan, if such can be called what Mr Welles seemed to have in mind". This entailed a German withdrawal from Poland and Bohemia "within an area to be agreed by discussion". In order to achieve guaranteed security "inasmuch as paper assurances and signatures were valueless, a scheme should be found for rapid and progressive disarmament of the belligerents", by the destruction of "offensive weapons on land and in the air". In addition, armies would remain mobilised, the blockade enforced and the United States would help to supervise and monitor the procedure

¹FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/61, 8th March. 1940. Telegram to Lord Lothian.

²See Chapter 5.

³FO 371/24406, 11th March. 1940. Telegram No 253 to Lothian.

and be linked with an attempt at economic reconstruction.

The Prime Minister's response to this was that such a scheme was impossible because, however laudable, it could not come into effect "in advance of the restoration of confidence", and that confidence was absent due to "the impossibility of trusting Hitler."¹ As Chamberlain later reported to Cabinet, Welles had recognised the extreme difficulty of any arrangement which allowed Hitler to remain "a leading personality in Germany". The Prime Minister also disagreed over the relationship between confidence and security; "He [the Prime Minister] had rejected the theory that it was possible to secure disarmament first and confidence second. The exact reverse was the case. It was fantastic to believe that it would be possible to persuade nations which had lived for so long under terror of Germany to give up the means of defending themselves, unless there was a complete change of heart in Germany", and, Chamberlain added later, "it would be a long time before confidence could be restored".² Within the context of Welles' visit, the Prime Minister's attitude meant that there was no possible prospect of negotiations developing. The enquiry about peace was never given the opportunity of becoming anything else. Yet the Cabinet papers do reveal that this did not mean that the idea of negotiations at some time was finally rejected. Winston Churchill might feel able to tell Welles that "Now that we had entered the war we must, and should, fight it to a finish", but such language and thought was clearly foreign to his Cabinet colleagues.³ Nevertheless, even for Halifax the problems were greater than "paper ingenuity in the devising of practical arrangements about disarmament".⁴

With any specific possibility of peace proposals emanating from Welles' visit eroded by the meeting of 11 March, when a further discussion

¹*Ibid*, Telegram No.256.

²Cab 65/6, Wm(40)67, 13th March 1940.

³*Ibid*.

⁴*Halifax Papers, Diary, 11th March 1940. A.7.8.3.*

took place on the 13th, it quickly turned to generalities and future possibilities. After briefly re-affirming "the impossibility of proceeding on the assumption that disarmament could by itself breed confidence", and such "academic" matters as the attitude of Russia, Chamberlain repeated Britain's wider position on peace negotiations:

"But before anything was possible, it was necessary that, as had frequently been stated, this country should be convinced that there was a real change of heart in Germany and that there should be some assurance that any arrangements reached would be maintained. This was the consideration that led the Prime Minister to feel it impossible to deal with the present regime which had so effectively destroyed confidence".

While the development of the arguments following this is described elsewhere,¹ Welles was able to press the Prime Minister on whether it really was true that no negotiations would be possible with Hitler. In the end, both Halifax and Chamberlain agreed that if the occupied lands were freed and offered reparation, if German strength relative to that of the Allies was acceptable, and if there was political liberalisation, then they could "not be justified in refusing discussion".² However, the prospects of this were remote in the extreme. In Chamberlain's words to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers, "the difficulty was not to devise plans which many of us had sought to do in the past, but to find the will to put them into practice in good faith".³

How then should the Sumner Welles visit be viewed? To the National Peace Council he was an emissary of hope that a way to a settle-

¹See Chapter 5.

²FO 371/24406, 13th March 1940. Telegram No. 274.

³FO 371/24406, 13th March 1940. Circular D No. 83. To Prime Ministers of the Commonwealth.

ment could be reached.¹ To Euan Wallace and Lord Chatfield, he was a man whose view had been "very substantially altered" by the "very strong impression in France and England of our determination not to stop fighting", a sentiment with which the British Ambassador to Paris concurred.² To Samuel Hoare he was "a complacent well meaning fat!".³

The Prime Minister's conclusion was that what began as a tour of enquiry served this purpose and was prevented from being transformed into any kind of peace offensive by the Government informing him "fully and frankly of their views".⁴ Although it was possible that Welles was going to recommend that Roosevelt "make some attempt to bring the war to an end even if that attempt should prove embarrassing to the Allies",⁵ whatever transpired, the Prime Minister said, "we are ready to meet it".⁶

For the writer's purpose, the major importance of Sumner Welles' visit to London was the opportunity it provided for all questions of the Government's war aims and attitudes towards a negotiated settlement to be fully discussed. As the following chapter will show, it was the elucidation of the Government's position, particularly as regards the position of Hitler himself, which was most important. The difficulties in the way of any negotiation were enormous and the passage of time had only made them worse. The disappointments and frustration of so-called peace feelers which had come to nothing, the reluctance of the neutrals to see things Britain's way, and Hitler's steadfast refusal to show that he realised he could not win, created an attitude of cynicism towards any peace approach or offer of mediation. Peace would not be impossible by means of negotiation but it was not likely to happen, particularly not in the foreseeable future.

¹NPC 3. *Letter on behalf of the National Peace Council by Dr C.E.M. Joad to Sumner Welles, 13th March. 1940. National Peace Council Papers.*

²Wallace Diary, 9-17th March 1940. *Mss Eng Hist c 496; Chatfield to Lothian, 14th March, CHT/6/2; FO 371/24406 c3977/89/18, 14th March 1940.*

³Hoare Diary, Templewood Papers, 17th March 1940. Vol XI/2.

⁴Hansard, Vol.358, Col.358, 19th March 1940.

⁵FO 371/24406, c4564/89/18, p.250, 27th March 1940, *Foreign Office telegram to Lothian.*

⁶Hansard, Vol.358, Col.358, 19th March 1940.

CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPING WAR AIMS, OCTOBER 1939 TO APRIL 1940

The deliberations over the reply to Hitler's speech of 6 October occasioned the first real definition of Britain's war aims, although, even then, the subject was still far from clear to many people. In the words of a Foreign Office telegram to Lord Lothian, war aims had been defined "as far as practicable in the present circumstances". The object of this chapter is to explore both the specific circumstances and general constraints which acted upon Government thinking about war aims for the remainder of the "phoney war".

In mid-October, the Government's thinking on war aims could be summarised as:

"No reliance on assurances of present German Government reparation of wrongs to Czechs and Poles, full and convincing guarantees, no desire for vindictive peace, up to German Government to make proposals and give concrete evidence of its pacific intentions".¹

Given such lack of precision, the wish of some members of the Foreign Office to formulate war aims more exactly was understandable. But instead of this being a deliberate desire,² the major impetus was provided by the succession of peace feelers, attempts at mediation and high level enquiries which proliferated in the period between October 1939 and May 1940. For example, when the Dutch and Belgian monarchs offered to mediate, it was necessary for the reply "to be drafted with great care" and even concerted with the French.³ Such discussion forced Britain's position to be examined even if it was deliberately never fully

¹FO 800/310, 20th Oct. To Lothian "for your personal and confidential information", which was seen and initialled by both Halifax and Cadojan. All references in this Chapter are to 1939 unless otherwise stated.

²FO 800/325, 25th Sept. Memorandum on war aims by Rex Leeper.

³Cab 65/2, WM (39) 75, 8th Nov. Halifax's report to the Cabinet.

clarified. In February 1940, the same process occurred due to the impending visit of the US Under-Secretary of State, Sumner Welles. On this occasion, R.A. Butler wrote; "a more detailed statement of our war aims may arise in conversation with the American Under-Secretary's visit; but in framing our war aims we must keep in step with France".¹

Despite the many occasions when a clear statement of war aims was required, the whole subject contained within it so many difficulties² that in the end all that were adopted were principles rather than specifics. The task is, therefore, to examine these principles, the arguments which led to their adoption or blurring, and the way they developed over time. Although attempts will be made to avoid repetition, the cyclical nature of the discussions means that each issue tended to be regularly re-argued. Possibly because of this, such discussions tended to become abstract, seemingly unconnected to the ebb and flow of events. Although once Poland had fallen there were rather few momentous events forcing themselves upon the Cabinet's thinking. Nevertheless, there was something academic, even on occasion fanciful, about the conclusions reached.

One of the most obvious war aims concerned the fate of the countries Hitler had conquered. Yet despite this, Hore-Belisha felt able to broadcast that "Our aims are not defined by geographical frontiers ... This is no war about a map!".³ President Roosevelt was also reported as saying "Boundaries, in his view, do not count in this way. The issue is not, and should not be, boundaries and peoples".⁴ There was much truth in this. Nevertheless, the fates of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark and Norway were crucial.

On 3 November Lord Lothian's understanding was that "The official policy of His Majesty's Government is to restore autonomy to Poland and

¹Butler Papers, Trinity College, Cambridge. File 3/9, 12th Feb 1940.

²FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/6, 28th Oct. Rex Leeper, the advocate of clear and detailed planning for formulating war aims, admitted that the difficulties in the way of this were daunting.

³Hore-Belisha broadcast 20th Oct., see his diary for that date. Minney, p.250-1.

⁴Beaverbrook Papers, BBK c/152, 4th Nov. Beaverbrook of Roosevelt.

Czechoslovakia and to create guarantees against a repetition of Hitlerite wars and threats of war".¹ Sir Samuel Hoare felt that we "can be rather more definite" than this; "that we should need more than the autonomy of Poland and Czechoslovakia. If there are to be safeguards for peace in the future surely Poland and Czechoslovakia must be independent".² Early in December Lord Halifax told the House of Lords that "We desire peoples who have been deprived of their independence to recover their liberties".³ The degree of vagueness in this statement - the substitution of "liberties" for the more definite "independence" - was a common occurrence. It was not until 11 December, however, that this was commented upon by the Foreign Office. In the most categorical statement yet made, J.K. Roberts wrote "Poland and Czechoslovakia must be recognised as sovereign states and must participate in any peace conference as such". This was "generally in keeping with our policy" but was something that "we have never laid down ... in so many words".⁴ From then on statements were or were not specific according to circumstance. On 7 February R.A. Butler could not be "any more explicit" than saying that Britain was fighting for Poland's right "to independent national existence".⁵ On 24 February, in his "Hitler has missed the bus" speech, Chamberlain said it was "the independence of the Poles and the Czechs" which "must be restored",⁶ while in mid-March it was the "freedom" of the Czechs which was at issue.⁷

Despite the imprecision about the independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia, what cannot be denied was that there was no commitment

¹*Chatfield Papers, CHT/6/2, 3rd Nov. Lothian to Chatfield. This letter was also sent to Hoare and others.*

²*Templewood Papers, Vol XII/I, 21st Nov. Hoare to Lothian.*

³*The Times, 6th Dec.*

⁴*FO 371/22947, c20056, 11th Dec.*

⁵*In reply to Parliamentary Question from Mr Duncan, Hansard 7th Feb 1940. Vol. 357, Col. 186.*

⁶*The Times, 26th Feb. 1940.*

⁷*Halifax broadcast to the Czech people, 14th March. Reported in Daily Telegraph on 15th March 1940.*

to restoring the boundaries of these countries. There were many reasons for this. One obvious one was that it would require the Soviet Union to evacuate part of Poland. Yet this was only part of a larger problem. Boundaries were merely lines on a map, and should not stand in the way of peace. The concern for the independence of territories conquered by Germany was not due to a sudden compassion for their peoples. Far less did it stem from a wish to return things to the pre-war status quo or from a responsibility to honour past pledges. Rather, as frequently mentioned in previous chapters, the over-riding determination was to ensure that the Germans learned that aggression did not pay. Clear and incontestable proof of this was the insistence that their conquests must be given up. The "freedom", "autonomy" or "independence" of Poland and Czechoslovakia was essential as evidence of an Allied victory. The Germans must be taught that "aggression has not paid and will not pay in the future"¹, and no minor territorial difference - or pledge - would be allowed to jeopardise this.

The same preoccupations applied to other territories subjected to German rule. As regards Austria, although the French spoke of "righting the injustices imposed by force on Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland", Austria was not usually included by Britain in this regard. In general, the Foreign Office did not wish to dwell on Austria's position, and could not think of a totally satisfactory answer to the conundrum it presented: the question of whether it should be treated as part of Germany or one of her conquests was never resolved.² However, no such problems were presented by the German occupation of Denmark. Asked whether the Allies would agree to "the restoration of the freedom and independence of Denmark", R.A. Butler replied in a most unusual way, "Yes, Sir".³

¹Chatfield Papers, CHT/6/2, 27th Nov. In response to Lothian of 3rd Nov. Ibid Note 1, p.138.

²FO 371/24362, 6th May 1940.

³Hansard, Col.1200. R.A. Butler in response to Question from Mr Mander. Vol.360, 8th May 1940.

One of the continuing central aspects of Britain's war aims was whether the war was against Germany or against the Nazi system. Although this may seem to be rather obscure, the distinction was of great importance. If war was against "Hitlerism" - as stated previously - then it might not be necessary either to defeat Germany militarily or to impose punitive terms upon her once beaten. This also meant that it could be easier to negotiate peace than if a full defeat were required. Over this issue there was considerable difference with the French Government, which will be discussed later.

On 14 November, Chamberlain wrote of his desire for a peace "just to all nations including Germany", hoping that this could be achieved "without more serious fighting"¹, while in early December he expressed his determination to "finish with the [Nazis] system once and for all" before laying the "solid foundations of a better world".² When talking with Major-General Pownall of French peace aims, Chamberlain felt it would be most dangerous to talk about whether Germany should be divided up, as this would unite the German people round Hitler - and thus lessen the chance of an early peace.³ In March 1940 the Prime Minister's conversations with Sumner Welles, who stated that the Germans were convinced that it was Britain's intention to divide up Germany, must have served to reinforce such arguments.

The Prime Minister's most important reference to whether Britain was fighting against Germany and her people or simply against Hitler and the Nazis was in the speech at the Mansion House on 9 January.

"To put it about that the Allies desire the annihilation of the German people, is a fantastic and malicious invention which can only be put forward for home consumption. On the

¹Prem 1/443, 14th Nov. Chamberlain to Lord Darnley.

²Chamberlain Papers, NC7/11/32, 9th Dec. To Howard Griffen MP.

³Pownall Diary, 17th Dec. Report of conversation with Chamberlain.

other hand, German people must realise that the responsibility for the prolongation of this war and of the suffering it may bring in the coming years is theirs, as well as that of the tyrants who stand over them".¹

This "timely admonition"² was taken as a definite statement of Government policy for the remainder of the Chamberlain Government.³ Before expanding upon its implications, it is worth highlighting a number of other related comments. In February, the Prime Minister replied to letters from Lords Brocket and Buccleuch which advocated an early peace. To Brocket he wrote; "... this does not mean that I want a revengeful peace or that I have any desire to cut Germany up into little bits". Rather as "soon as I can see any reasonable hope of a change of spirit" towards peace on an acceptable basis "I shall be ready to come forward half way. Till then I shall continue to recommend the country to fight on as hard as it can". To Lord Buccleuch, Chamberlain was even more expansive. "The truth is, of course", he wrote, - "that we never had, and have not now, any desire to destroy or cripple Germany ..."⁴ He then proceeded to tackle head-on the issue of whether war was against Hitler or Germany. "You fear also that a war begun as a war against Hitler has now become a war against Germany. I would remind you that what we are in fact fighting is aggression. Aggression has been, and there is certainly no evidence that it has ceased to be, the policy of Hitler. That is why we make war upon Hitler and why, so long as he can persuade or compel Germany to support him in such a policy, we must wage war against Germany".

¹*The Times*, 10th Jan. 1940. Report of Chamberlain's Mansion House speech of previous day.

²*Daily Telegraph*, 10th Jan. 1940.

³*Hansard*, Vol. 360, Col. 533, 30th April 1940.

⁴*Prem 1/443*, 2nd Feb. 1940. To Lord Brockett; and 12th Feb. 1940 to Duke of Buccleuch.

What, then, can be made of the Prime Minister's attitude? Firstly, that it is not fitting to describe British policy as either anti-German or anti-Nazi. The question ought not to be either/or - rather it was both. Secondly, that the further away appeared the possibility of peace, the more anti-German aims appeared. Thirdly, that Chamberlain was anti-German only in as much as the Germans were pro-Hitler; and once they stopped supporting Hitler, he would stop opposing them. He was anti-Nazi only because the Nazis persisted in disturbing the peace of Europe. Once it could be proved that they had ceased their aggression permanently, there was no obstacle to peace. The objective of a guaranteed peace was still the overriding aim - and Chamberlain would not allow himself to be drawn or committed to anything which stood in the way of this.¹ It must also be noted that the idea of a long and bitter war to defeat German military power or bring her to her knees as in 1918 was anathema to Chamberlain; he would be temperamentally inclined to seek a different solution, and there were good grounds for this. If his objective was a secure and stable settlement then there was no point in a repetition of the chaos and turmoil which followed the Allies' victory of 1918.²

Having described the Prime Minister's position, it is now necessary to look at that of other leading members of his Government. Lord Halifax, as would be expected, stuck very closely to the line adopted by the Prime Minister, for example when writing that "It is against the German policy of aggression that we are fighting".³ In his draft reply to a French memorandum on war aims, however, Halifax showed the essential ambivalence of Britain's position. The Allies were fighting "to stop acts of aggression on the part of the German Government", and agreed

¹See Chamberlain's refusal to answer Sir Nairne Stewart Sanderson's question about the use of "German" or "Nazi" by the BBC. Hansard, Vol.359, Col.1112, 18th April 1940.

²Harvey Diary, 29th Feb. 1940. Chamberlain is reported to be thinking along these lines. Add Mss 56396.

³FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/24, 24th Oct. Halifax to Richard Stokes MP.

that "the removal of Hitler and his entourage may not be a sufficient remedy ..." He continued, "unless a German Government can be found which is willing and able voluntarily to accept their terms"; the Allies had to "secure the defeat of Germany".¹ Defeat of Germany was, for Halifax as for Chamberlain, something which might be necessary if Germany could not be brought to her senses otherwise. As he told a meeting of Ministers outside the Cabinet in early February, "At present the hope of peace without a "blood bath survived ..."² When considering the future, the Foreign Secretary would not rule anything out because he did not want "to incur the charge of hubris". Nevertheless, his "conditions of peace would be such that Hitler would not be able to accept them".³ The effect in Germany of the idea that the Allies wished to destroy her was another issue which concerned Halifax, as his speech of 10 April showed.⁴ It was not any concern of Britain he said "what kind of regime is chosen by other countries" and there was nothing in Britain's aims which would "either dishonour or impair the self-respect of a Germany prepared to take her place in good faith in the European family of nations ..." Halifax continued, "In other words, Germany should be a good neighbour, and not persistently disturb those who wish to live in peace. That is the object, as I see it, both of our military and diplomatic efforts ..."⁵ Again, there was the same emphasis on bringing an end to aggression and an absolute reluctance to be drawn to specifics. Whether it was a desire to avoid hubris, or a fundamental caution, Halifax and Chamberlain would commit themselves only to the ending of aggression from Germany.

Sir Alec Cadogan viewed the question of whether war was against Hitler or Germany in different terms. For him it was a matter of

¹Cab 67/2, WP (G)(39) 77, 8th Nov.

²FO 800/321, H/XXII/5, 6th Feb 1940.

³Dalton Diary, mid-Feb 1940. Part 1/22.

⁴Halifax Diary, 2nd April 1940. A7.8.3.

⁵FO 371/24362, p.126. Halifax speech to the National Defence Public Interest Committee on 10th April 1940.

propaganda because he did not think peace imminent. In this he differed from his political superiors. While peace was a long way off, the crucial elements were basic preparation of Britain's position at an eventual conference and the continuing propaganda war. On the former Cadogan wondered whether it would profit Britain to discover whether any alternative German Government - of an undefeated Germany - would accept peace on the basis of "righting the wrongs done to Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, etc."¹ As regards the second element, in a reflective survey of British propaganda during the first ten months of the war, Cadogan, noted that there had been a change away from the initial emphasis against Hitler and Hitlerism and towards the French view that "all Germans were equally wicked and that our propaganda should be anti-German (not only anti-Nazi)".² For Cadogan the issue whether Britain was anti-German or anti-Nazi was not one of great importance. What mattered was what the propaganda line should be, and more will be said of Cadogan's conclusions on this later. His was an essentially practical approach, devoid of much of the theorising of the Foreign Secretary, but in the end pointing to a similar conclusion: avoid firm statements while seeing what sort of peace may be possible.

Winston Churchill's main contribution to a debate that was not one of his highest concerns occurred in November. On the first day of the month, Churchill expressed alarm about discussions with Dahlerus in which it had been said that Britain could not come to terms with any Government in Germany "unless Hitler ceased to hold a position where he could influence the course of events".³ Churchill's main comments, however, were contained in a broadcast on 12 November, variously described as "bombastic" and "beyond words vulgar".⁴ These criticisms arose not

¹FO 371/24362, c15435, 31st Jan 1940. Cadogan Note of 24th Jan 1940.

²FO 800/322, H/XXX/33, 25th July 1940.

³Gilbert, p.72. This will be returned to later.

⁴Dalton Diary, 12th Nov. Part 1/21.; Gilbert, P.81, extract from Colville Diary, 13th Nov.

merely from the style adopted, but because despite saying "The whole world is against Hitler and Hitlerism", he also sought to draw parallels with the Great War. He talked of "Hitler and his Huns", and of "the Germany which assaults us today" being weaker than that which was "forced to beg for an armistice twenty-one years ago".¹ This can hardly have been to the liking of a Prime Minister who was eager to prevent the idea being established in German minds that the Allies were engaged in a repeat of the earlier conflict. Indeed Colville noted that "Winston's speech has made a very bad effect at No 10".² Paul Addison has observed that Churchill's linking of the words "Nazi", "German" and "Prussian" as all representing a "menace to Europe which will be completely broken and destroyed" caused considerable annoyance to R.A. Butler, who felt it necessary to inform the Italian Ambassador that "Churchill's speech was in conflict with the Government's views not only in the present instance. As a matter of fact he always spoke only as Mr Churchill". Given that Germany had been identified as the main long-term enemy since 1933, it seems rather curious that such strong criticism of her should have caused so much annoyance. But it does give a clue to the main thrust of Government thinking. For the Prime Minister the problem was not German strength but the German will. Therefore they could talk about securing peace without greatly reducing Germany's military power (although mutual disarmament would have been welcome). If their discussions frequently ignored the military dimension then it was because this dimension was not all-important. What mattered was German aggressiveness. Were Germany to be persuaded to renounce her aggressive ambition she would no longer be a threat. Such thinking was behind the rather academic discussions of who was responsible for the war, whether Hitler and "Hitlerism" were synonymous, what was the target

¹*Gilbert, ps.80-81. Broadcast 12th Nov.*

²*Ibid.*

of Britain's war-making, and so on. For Churchill this thinking was foreign. Germany was enormously strong and unless she collapsed from within she would need to be defeated. To the extent that he shared the view that Germany would collapse it was not allowed to limit his aims in the way it appears to have done with Chamberlain and Halifax.¹

One of these rather academic questions which were then seen as central was whether Britain was fighting Germany or the Nazis, and whether the German people truly supported Hitler. If they did, the distinction between "German" and "Nazi" fell to the ground. If they did not, then this division must be widened. Among the British people, opinion was divided. Although in September 1939, a British Institute of Public Opinion poll showed that 91% of the sample believed that the Nazi Government rather than the German people were responsible for the war,² the papers of those in and close to the Government do not show such a majority. To Lord Chatfield there was "a big gap" between those who held that Germans were "inherently brutal and untrustworthy", and those who looked to a "good German Government" as the solution. And it was a gap which might widen. Lord Derby, however, felt that the distinction between Germany and Hitler was a case of the wish being father to the thought,³ and he was probably right. The Sunday Express agreed with this, warning of the "dangerous misconception" of an anti-Nazi opposition⁴, while Ivone Kirkpatrick of the Central Department of the Foreign Office felt that there was "so much sales resistance" in Germany to the idea of a quick overthrow of Hitler⁵ that his position was secure.

One attempt at reconciling the difference between the anti-German and anti-Nazi views was made in the Ministry of Information's "Principles

¹*Ibid.*

²*Gerald Barry Papers, BLPES. British Institute of Public Opinion Poll. In November 1940 this figure was 48%, with 50% feeling that it was the German people's fault. No date but Sept.*

³*Beaverbrook Papers. BBK c/115, 9th Dec. Lord Derby to Beaverbrook.*

⁴*Sunday Express, 4th Feb. 1940.*

⁵*Monckton Papers. Note by Kirkpatrick, Feb. 1940. Dep. Monckton Trustees 8.*

and Objectives of British Wartime Propaganda". The middle course it took was clearly designed to be as widely acceptable as possible. The argument was built in the following way. Germany had the world's greatest military potential; Hitler had spent seven years building this potential into a war machine; it was that war machine which must be defeated. The conclusion was "To that extent you are fighting the German people - 80 million of them".¹ By April, however, opinion had so shifted that the Ministry did not need to be so circumspect. When asked by the Controller of Programmes at the BBC whether the distinction between the Nazi Government and the German people was still to be drawn, the Director of Broadcasting Relations at the Ministry of Information replied in the following way:

"I have the Minister's authority for saying that it is no longer possible to maintain this distinction. The line taken in recent ministerial pronouncements is that the German people must be held responsible for the prolongation of the war, so long as they support their present Government. At present events show that the German people is in fact identifying itself with its Government and it is therefore useless to try to make a non-existent distinction".²

Even at the high point of the Government being prepared to attribute responsibility for the war to the German people there were still a number of reservations. Their guilt existed only "so long as they support their present Government", and what they were guilty of was not the starting but the "prolongation" of the war. Both of these qualifications meant that there was no commitment to a revengeful peace against

¹Butler Papers, File/911. 6th Feb.1940, but prepared in December and January.

²BBC(WAC) RG34/639/4, 17th April 1940. The relationship between aims and propaganda will be discussed later. The specific "pronouncement" being the Prime Minister's speech at the Mansion House on 9th Jan.1940.

the German people. As the above letter continued, "If a revolutionary situation were to appear in Germany at some future date it would again become valuable to distinguish Government from people".

The passage of time during the "Phoney War" brought a gradual change from "narrowly anti-Nazi to a more wide-ranging anti-German stance". Yet in many ways the latter was adopted for convenience as regards the French and out of frustration. Certainly as far as Chamberlain and Halifax were concerned it was never fully a matter of conviction. Had the possibility of peace occurred, the distinction would be raised once again. As Oliver Harvey insisted, Chamberlain would "be foolish enough" to negotiate with "Goering and co."¹ if Hitler was removed; and it is difficult to disagree with this.

Throughout the Phoney War there was a somewhat studied vagueness on the question of the target of Britain's war-making, although it was certainly not German military power. Although as early as November the India Office felt that the "initial exclusive emphasis on Hitlerism has been dropped", there was still no mention of war being against Germany as such in the Foreign Office's suggestion for the line to take when talking with Sumner Welles.² This resulted in the situation where in April the Ministry of Information felt it necessary to ask the Foreign Office for "an authoritative ruling on whether there had in fact been a change of our policy".³ The answer to this can be found in the Foreign Office's deliberation over how to deal with Mr Reginald Sorensen MP's question to the Prime Minister asking for a distinction between Germany and her government to be maintained in all statements of policy. In a most interesting discussion of policy changes, J.K. Roberts outlined a distinct development. Until the end of 1939, "we were very careful in all public pronouncements of emphasis that we were fighting

¹Harvey Diary, 24th Dec. Add Mss 56395.

²India Office, L/P+S/12/315, 17th Nov.; FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/64, to the King's Private Secretary.

³FO 371/24362, 25th April 1940.

the Nazi Government but not the German people or the "true Germany" which was being misgoverned by the Nazis". However, he commented that Chamberlain's Mansion House speech represented a change in his attribution of responsibility for the "prolongation" of the war to the German people. Yet still it was made clear that the German Government was the main target. Therefore the position was not that Britain was "fighting Germans as a whole" or "against Hitlerism only", but that the "German people cannot escape responsibility for the acts of Germany under her present rulers". In the ensuing discussion, in which both Cadogan and Chamberlain participated, there was little divergence from this view. Indeed it was pointed out that the question was "a timely opportunity of clearing ourselves" of the charge "of inconsistency and not knowing our own war aims".¹ The final statement being along the lines suggested by Roberts, i.e. that the Mansion House speech "remains the attitude of His Majesty's Government".

The Government's position from 9 April can therefore be summarised as being that Hitler was responsible for starting the war and the German people were responsible for its continuance by their support of Hitler. Although for them to expect the Germans to rebel after Hitler's greatest success seems both unreal and even a little unfair. Once peace came, however, the German people's responsibility would automatically be ended. One argument adopted for the including of the "responsibility" of the German people was, as mentioned in the previous Foreign Office discussion, that "we must also think of the reactions in France and in this country to any public expression of sympathy with "decent elements" in Germany". The influence of French opinions on British war aims was discussed in a reflective note by Cadogan in late July, when this influence no longer mattered. Commenting on a return to direct propaganda

¹*Ibid.*

against Hitler and Hitlerism, Cadogan wrote "we started on that note at the beginning of the war, but we were subsequently induced to change the time, mainly on the advice of the French",¹ who maintained that "all Germans were equally wicked". The influence of such French ideas and the difficulties this caused with the British Government are matters which throw some light on the development of the Chamberlain Government's war aims.²

On 19 December, the Supreme War Council³ discussed the question of a no separate peace agreement. During this, Chamberlain stated:

"In the British view the mere downfall of Hitler was not a sufficient guarantee of lasting peace, although it was an essential prerequisite of such a peace. On the British side there was also a determination to obtain lasting guarantees".⁴

In his report of this meeting to the Cabinet the following day, the Prime Minister expanded on his theme. He told his colleagues although "we had not yet made up our minds what would be required" in the form of guarantees, "we were, of course, ready to examine the French suggestion for strategic control of the Rhine".⁵ In reality the idea that the French should control bridgeheads on the Rhine was absurd; it would only be more likely to lead to further Franco-German antagonism. The importance of this statement is that it shows how far Chamberlain was prepared to bow to French pressure over the question of war aims. Yet the fundamental reason for this should not be seen as an acceptance of the French position. Instead, it was to prevent a most harmful division. To Lord Chatfield, who was present at the above-

¹FO 800/322, H/XXX/33, 25th July.1940. Cadogan Note.

²The separate but related topic of propaganda will be dealt with explicitly later in the chapter, although it will also be touched on here.

³The Council consisted of Chamberlain, Halifax, Chatfield and Ironside on the British side; Daladier, Chamber, Gamelin and Darlan on the French.

⁴Cab 99/3, SWC (39/40) 4th Meeting, 19th Dec.

⁵Cab 65/2, WM (39)120, 20th Dec.

mentioned Supreme War Council meeting, there were two "conceptions of peace": those who looked to "nothing less than a break-up" of Germany to secure the future and those who would "grant a just and even generous peace" to "a good German Government". Among the former group were "many Frenchmen, who are against the Germans as a nation".¹ It was his conclusion about this which is critical, because "Between these schools there is a big gap, which may be closed or opened as the war progresses". Chatfield was not alone in his concern. Vansittart wrote of "a grave danger of a split between us and the French" if we accepted the defeat of Hitler without that of German power".

Although the British Government always kept in mind the need to form peace terms only at the time of peace, there was, of course, much discussion of the broad lines an agreement would take. Therefore, can it be said that this speculation and consideration continued along the lines of a "guaranteed peace"? And, if so, of what nature?

That the objective was still a guaranteed peace, and that this objective remained for the duration of the phoney war, is clear. On 20 January, the Foreign Secretary said that:

"The only reason why peace cannot be made tomorrow is that the German Government have as yet given no evidence of their readiness to repair the damage that they have wrought upon their weaker neighbours, or of their capacity to convince the world that any pledge they may subscribe to is worth as much as the paper on which it may be written".²

And it was this second reason, the lack of guarantee, which was seen as pre-eminent, and it was one which the Opposition agreed with.³ The

¹Chatfield Papers, CHT/6/2, 27th Nov. Chatfield to Lothian.

²Halifax Papers, A4.410/No.1/4, 20th Jan.1940. Speech at Leeds.

³There was agreement on this within the Labour Party. See Policy Declaration by Labour's National Executive Committee "Labour, The War and The Peace". Philip Noel-Baker Papers, 9th Feb.1940 NBKR 2/47.

major¹ statement of the Government's view of war aims was the Prime Minister's speech of 24 February in Birmingham. Chamberlain said "we for our part should be ready to seek a settlement with any Government that had subscribed to those aims and given proof - proof that can be relied upon - of their sincerity".² And on 13 March, the Chancellor of the Exchequer further described "the most difficult, and at the same time the most essential, condition is that there should be effective guarantees that there will be no renewal of Nazi aggression in the future".³

It was not only in public statements that the key point of effective guarantees was made. It was a pivotal point of the discussions between Halifax and the US Ambassador, Joseph Kennedy, prior to Sumner Welles' visit to Europe in March,⁴ and it was central to the discussion with Welles himself. On 11 March Halifax reported to Lord Lothian in Washington that he had told Welles that "both the French and ourselves were constantly seeking to find effective guarantees for the future that we did not feel to be forthcoming from any promises and undertakings".⁵

Oliver Stanley said that "there was only one guarantee they could have, and that was that Germany should learn that these standards of gangster rule could not, did not, and never would pay".⁶ Or, in the Prime Minister's phrase, Germany must "show us conclusively that she has once and for all abandoned the thesis that might is right".⁷ Yet what would be the "tangible evidence" which Chamberlain also demanded? There was very little discussion of this. The impression gained is of a feeling that it will be obvious when a change of heart has taken place.

¹R.A. Butler reply to question from Arthur Henderson, 6th March 1940. *Hansard*, Vol.358, Cols.355-6.

²*The Times*, 26th Feb. 1940.

³*The Times*, 14th March 1940. Report of Simon's speech at National Liberal Club on 13th March 1940.

⁴FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/61, 8th March 1940.

⁵FO 371/24406, 11th March 1940.

⁶*Manchester Guardian*, 21st March 1940, Stanley speech, 20th March, also in FO 371/24362.

⁷*The Times*, 26th Feb. 1940.

However, certain strands of thought are discernible. One of these was disarmament, a hope which had somehow survived the disillusionment of the 1930's. But very few saw this as the main plank of a peace settlement. Also there was the question of whether disarmament should begin between the end of hostilities and the convening of a Peace Conference, or whether it should commence only after a treaty had been signed.¹ This was one of what may be termed "mechanical guarantees".² But even if, for example, the Germans were prepared "to hand over a large proportion of their aeroplanes for safe-keeping to the United States",³ the key question was whether the German people felt that war had been profitable. If by being forced to withdraw from Czechoslovakia and to offer recompense for despoiling Poland the German people realised that aggression did not pay, then mechanical guarantees would be valuable. But if this was not the conclusion drawn by Germany, no specific proposals had much value in themselves. The key was not so much in "depriving the German nation of the power" to go to war, as Kennedy suggested,⁴ but more that the concessions shown in the giving of guarantees proved that war was unprofitable. It was a German willingness to give guarantees that was looked for. It was not for Britain to suggest guarantees, or to help Germany towards this conclusion, but there had to be "such a move from the German side as will satisfy us that any promises they make will be kept".⁵ This move was usually described not in terms of any material

¹FO 371/24406, 11th March 1940. *Halifax and Chamberlain's conversation with Welles and Kennedy.*

²FO 800/324, 8th March 1940. *Kennedy to Halifax.*

³*Ibid*; also Halifax to Lord Noel-Buxton on 4th March 1940. Halifax wrote that he found it "difficult to believe" that the USA would be prepared to take an active part as a guarantor. And even if she did, this could only be "another guarantee", not the sole one. For Welles' comments on what may have been possible see FO 371/24406, 11th March, talk with Halifax.

⁴FO 800/324, 8th March 1940.

⁵Prem 1/443, Chamberlain letter to Lord Darnley, 14th Nov.

deed, or of the agreement of specific terms, but of a "change of heart".¹

To say that Britain's war aim was a "change of heart" by Germany appears unsatisfactory as it leaves open more questions than it answers. It was clear that this meant that aggression should stop, and that some restitution should be made, but did it also mean that Hitler had to be replaced? This will be considered later.

It would be a fair point to argue that the above discussions about guarantees had little relevance to the important events of both the war and of any peace; that "guarantees" were only an element of the post-war balance of power. Yet the majority of the Cabinet persisted in their refusal to view matters in such terms. They could not really believe Germany was irrevocably belligerent, and thus a real "change of heart" was an effective preventative of future war. Although they had learned since Munich of Hitler's inherent untrustworthiness, they had still not abandoned the thinking that conflicts could be settled by drawing up fair and stable agreements. And in the months before the attack on France there was no reason for them to think differently.

At the same time as the insistence on at least a guaranteed peace, there was no general drift towards a policy which insisted on military victory. Although there were occasional comments about "destroying his [Germany's] military power",² the overwhelming weight of comment and statement was explicit in leaving the way open for negotiation. Chamberlain said "Nevertheless we do not want to continue the war a day longer than is necessary if a satisfactory settlement can be obtained in another way";³ "this does not mean that I want a revengeful peace or that I have any desire to cut Germany up into little bits. It does mean that

¹*Prem 1/443, 12th Feb. 1940. Chamberlain to Duke of Buccleuch.*

²*The Times, 19th Jan. 1940, which commented on the speech by the British Ambassador to France to the American Club in Paris.*

³*Cab 21/952, 9th Nov. Telegram from Chamberlain to the Dominions, Circular D No. 71.*

she has got to adopt a new spirit, get rid of the gangsters and convince the world that in the future she is ready to co-operate with other civilized peoples on the basis not only of equality, but of common aims and ideals".¹ And again on 24 February: "It is therefore for Germany to take the next step and to show us conclusively that she has once and for all abandoned the thesis that might is right",² a sentence which clearly envisaged an outcome short of military victory. Nearly a month later the same message was put rather differently. "We should all desire to avoid a war fought out with the violence which modern weapons make possible", wrote Chamberlain "if we can achieve by other means the stable peace we are seeking".³

Nevertheless, if there was no general move away from a guaranteed peace in the direction of military victory, was there a move in the other direction?

Leo Amery MP suspected "just a suggestion of 'appeasement'"⁴ in Chamberlain's 24th February speech, and R.A. Butler, in commending this speech to Lord Brocket, assured him that the Government "should not be silly enough to miss any opportunity if a real one arises".⁵ Yet it was the firm front against the idea of an inconclusive peace which predominated. On 16 November Chamberlain insisted that "there must first be such a move from Germany as will satisfy us of her good faith".⁶ And this was repeated in January; "The point on which I am in disagreement with you" wrote the Prime Minister, "is that I do not believe that until Germany gives proof of a change of heart a negotiated peace would be a lasting peace or provide us with those stable conditions which we all so earnestly desire".⁷ In the Foreign Secretary's view, the numbers of

¹Prem 1/443, 2nd Feb.1940. Chamberlain to Lord Brockett.

²*The Times*, 26th Feb.1940.

³Prem 1/436, 20th March 1940. Chamberlain to Commander Stephen King Hall MP.

⁴Amery Diary, 24th Feb.1940.

⁵R.A. Butler Papers, File E3/2. 1st March 1940. To Lord Brockett.

⁶Prem 1/443, 16th Nov. Chamberlain to Lord Darnley.

⁷Chamberlain Papers, NC7/11/33, 10th Jan.1940.;

or R.A. Butler Papers, File E3/7. Letter to Prof. Gupta, 12th March 1940

people willing to contemplate ending the war "on the basis of a patched-up arrangement that did not give security for the future was quite insignificant".¹

The objective was a guaranteed peace, and Chamberlain declared that "I shall be just as determined and just as persistent during the war in achieving the purpose that we have in mind as I was in trying to keep the peace before the war started".² And that "purpose" was a guaranteed peace.

When one comes to consider the French position, it can be seen that there were definitely "thorny problems" ahead as Britain and France tried to arrive at united war aims,³ a process which Samuel Hoare was not keen to accelerate, fearing that "we may well start a wrangle between them and ourselves".⁴ J.K. Roberts, also of the Foreign Office, noted the increasing French criticism of the "British attitude which distinguishes between the Nazi regime and the German people".⁵ One analysis presented the difference as one between "convincing" the Germans that they could not win, and "preventing" Germany being able to repeat her aggression: between the two the gulf was wide indeed.⁶ At the meeting of the Supreme War Council referred to above, this gulf was both highlighted and papered over. According to a Foreign Office account, the French Prime Minister's position was that "It is therefore essential to make it impossible for Germany to disturb the peace of Europe once more". To this Chamberlain "agreed" that "we should, like the French, require guarantees for a lasting peace". This was clearly not what the French had suggested, but, presumably in the cause of Allied unity and possibly with each hoping

¹FO 800/324, H/XXXVII/61, 8th March 1940. Halifax to Lothian, reporting conversation with Kennedy.

²Hansard, Vol.358, Col.1952, 19th March 1940.

³Cab 65/2, WM (39)76, 9th Nov.

⁴Templewood Papers, Hoare to Lothian, 21st Nov. Vol XI.

⁵FO 371/22946, 7th Nov. Vansittart on War Aims; FO 371/22947, 30th Nov. Robert's comment on Rex Leeper's "Peace Aims".

⁶FO 408/69, 30th Nov.

to modify the position of the other at a later date, the fundamental difference between making it "impossible" for Germany to re-start a war and of securing "guarantees" against this eventuality was not pointed out.

The differences over war aims passed through two main stages before being resolved. The reason for and the extent of the resolution being of great interest to the study of the development of Britain's war aims. Although from early October at least it had become clear that the two allies were viewing different things as prerequisites for peace, there appears to have been some attempt by the French not to make this public. Daladier's speeches were "very vague and restrained",¹ talking of "a lasting peace absolutely guaranteeing national security".² The first real British discussions of the divergent views took place, therefore, within the Foreign and India Offices. On 20 October Laurence Collier of the Foreign Office wrote a "semi-official letter", seen by R.A. Butler, to the British Minister in Afghanistan, asking for his views on "the question of public declaration of British war aims". This letter dealt with a possible moving away from Britain's avowedly anti-Nazi stance. One direction was to make war aims "even vaguer" than before, by announcing that it was the preservation of democracy against "totalitarianism". This would include oblique disapproval of the Soviet Union, and would be likely "to appeal to enlightened neutral opinion". The other departure concerned making aims more anti-German. In discussing this, Collier wrote of the difference, often mentioned in the newspapers of both countries, between the Allies' war aims. It was this acknowledgement which caused the first discussion of how to cope with what was seen as a widening gulf.³ When the Viceroy, Linlithgow, saw a copy of Collier's letter, he thought it "explosive" in the frank way the Allies' divergence

¹FO 371/24362, 19th Feb. 1940. Comments by J.K. Roberts on Daladier's speeches.

²One of the speeches referred to above (Note 1), 6th Oct., to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies.

³India Office, 20th Oct., L/P+S/12/4503. Collier to Frazer-Tytler.

of views was discussed.¹ However, two days after this complaint, another and even more bluntly worded message was sent from the Ministry of Information. Although relating primarily to propaganda, the Ministry's comments are of very clear meaning. They began by stating that Britain's "propaganda [was] not against Germany or Germans as such but against Hitlerism and Nazi regime", with there being no desire to "penalise Germany as a whole in the coming peace".² After stating the British position thus, the message continued in classic understatement, "You are probably aware that French opinion has been somewhat suspicious of this attitude". Although the French dislike of "any insistence on our part that we are not fighting Germany, but merely Hitler" was undoubted as far as the Ministry of Information was concerned, "No change of policy in this respect is now in contemplation".³

The above message represented the Ministry of Information's view, but by the time it was written, it was already being challenged. Between October and the end of the year the British public position began to alter. On 17 November an official of the India Office noted

¹India Office, Mss Eur D 609/18, 13th Nov. Linlithgow to Zetland, Secretary of State for India. Linlithgow's description of the "divergence of views" is worthy of quotation:

"... whether our objective was really to put an end to Nazism or to dispose of Germany for good and all, with the implicit but inevitably connected question whether the peace terms when the time comes are to represent a stiffer brew than the Versailles Treaty, with the inclusion of provisions designed to break up the Reich into its component elements before Frederick the Great, or whether contrariwise, having given Hitler a thorough beating we were then going to cherish Germany in the hopes that a carefully sponsored convalescent treatment with liberal subventions and privileges (some of which will have to be given at the expense in terms of standards of living of the wage earners of Great Britain and France) may make the leopard for ever change its spots!"

²Although described as propaganda there is no doubt that this was in fact the Prime Minister's real aim.

³India Office, L/P+S/12/315, 15th Nov. Memorandum from the MoI to British posts in the Middle East, Persia and Afghanistan. The purpose was to discover whether an abandonment of the British position would damage her cause.

that the circular of the 15th¹ was "in a sense behind the times",² because war aims had been "not infrequently stated" as being against "the perpetually recurring fear of German aggression".³ It is therefore possible to detect both anti-Nazi and anti-German strands of thought with a hard and fast distinction between the two becoming less easy to make.

In early November the Government had to face up to the question of how to unify or at least bring closer together the aims of the allies. This was in response to a French initiative which raised the issue. Halifax's solution to this dilemma was to talk of "acts of aggression on the part of the German Government in the present" and of it being necessary to "secure the defeat of Germany" unless a Government of Germany "can be found which is willing and able voluntarily to accept their [the Allies'] terms". Yet it would be "premature" to consider territorial settlements which could only be discussed "in the light of circumstances prevailing at the time". Finally, he stated that "the removal of Hitler and his entourage may not be a sufficient remedy against German militarist and expansionist ideas ..."⁴ Even in what was clearly an attempt to synthesise the thinking of the two Governments, the Foreign Secretary still would not make two related concessions: he would not commit Britain to a military defeat of Germany and nor was there an explicit and watertight rejection of talks with the existing German Government.

It has already been established that distrust existed in France at the narrowness of British objectives, but it is worth noting that an opposite suspicion existed in London. Two weeks after writing the above, Halifax informed Lord Lothian about his view of French aims:

¹*Ibid.*

²*India Office, L/P+S/12/315, 17th Nov.*

³*The reference being to the Prime Minister's speech of 20th Oct. in the House of Commons.*

⁴*Cab 67/2, WP (G)(39)77, 8th Nov. Draft memorandum on War Aims by Halifax.*

"If they have any definite ideas, it appears to be the dismemberment of Germany. I hope they will keep that to themselves, as any such proclaimed objective would be more calculated, I should say, to weld Germany into a solid bloc".¹

This view of the French position was stressed by Pownall to Chamberlain when the former reported General George's opinion that "if the British again stood in the way of what the French considered a fair solution they would never forgive us again".²

The difference between Halifax's view of Britain's war aims and his opinion of those of France was immense, and not merely a matter of propaganda stances. Although Foreign Office officials could talk of the distinction between German and Nazi being "useful for propaganda purposes"³ there was more to it than this. Nor was it wholly correct to say, with Ivone Kirkpatrick, that "We distinguish between German and Nazi in the hope of a split".⁴ The difference of opinion was real.⁵ As General Ironside defined the French position "They say clearly that the Germans will only be beaten if their army is knocked out. No mere change of Hitler for Goering, or Goering for someone more moderate, will suit them".⁶ There was no way that any official British statement would have sounded such a tone. Therefore, the differences between the two

¹FO 800/311, H/XIV/395, 21st Nov. To Lothian, he continued "My highest hope would be that Germany should disrupt from within...", which re-emphasises the link between the hope of an early end to the war and the willingness to consider peace talks without the defeat of Germany.

²Pownall Diary, 17th Dec. Implying a repeat of Versailles, at least, was something which Chamberlain was determined to avoid.

³FO 371/22947, 30th Nov. J.K. Robert's comment on Rex Leeper's memorandum on "Peace Aims". This reference contains a number of interesting views.

⁴Kirkpatrick's comment on Leeper's memorandum, referred to in Note 3 above.

⁵FO 371/24362, 15th Jan 1940. As Kirkpatrick explained to the British Ambassador in Paris.

⁶Ironside Diary, 24th March 1940.

sides needed to be minimised. Rather than make real moves towards the French position, public statements allowed a blurring of the British objective to take place, with propaganda statements being "expanded somewhat in order to make it more suitable for French thought".¹

The most significant move to prevent the two Allies drifting apart over their differing views of the war was the decision to conclude a no-separate-peace agreement. This was first informally discussed by Chamberlain and Daladier at the Supreme War Council meeting of 20 December and concluded at that of 28 March² with Daladier's successor, Paul Reynaud. Originally it had been hoped that the Dominions and India would be able to associate themselves with the declaration, but domestic considerations in South Africa and Canada prevented this.³ The reasons for this declaration were described as being "psychological" and to "counter German propaganda designed to drive a wedge between the Allies".⁴ However, other considerations also existed. As Sir Ronald Campbell, British Ambassador to Paris, wrote, the benefits were many-fold: It would bind a future French Government, "even if they might not be as sound" as Daladier's or Reynaud's so that they "would find it virtually impossible" to sign a separate peace;⁵ it would give "contractual form" to post-war Anglo-French co-operation; and in addition to the "immense encouragement" to the French, it would assist in "dissipating French suspicions as to the future attitude of His Majesty's Government after the defeat of Germany". Within two months of its signing, the agreement not to consider a separate peace was put to one side, but it was designed as a document for the long term. Beyond a repetition of the

¹Halifax's comment on Reith's memo of January on Propaganda policy Cab 65/5, WM (40) 15, 16th Jan. 1940.

²Cab 67/5, WP (G)(40) 86, 19th March 1940. Halifax memorandum.

³Ibid; the problem being the attitude of the Opposition in the former and the proximity of the elections in the latter.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. The fear that the French Government might change and become under the influence of such as Laval was always in British minds.

determination to work together, its importance was in its finding of an acceptable phrase to cover the central question of war aims and what sort of guarantees were to be obtained from Germany. Because of the general importance of the declaration it is worth full quotation:

"The Government of the French Republic and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland mutually undertake that during the present war they will neither negotiate nor conclude an armistice or treaty of peace except by mutual consent.

They undertake not to discuss peace terms before reaching complete agreement on the conditions necessary to ensure to each of them an effective and lasting guarantee of their security.

Finally, they undertake to maintain, after the conclusion of peace, a community of action in all spheres for so long as may be necessary to safeguard their security and to effect the reconstruction, with the assistance of other nations, of an international order which will ensure the liberty of peoples, respect for law and the maintenance of peace in Europe".¹

Following the announcement of this to Parliament, the Prime Minister pointed out that any proposal for peace, from whatever source, "would not even be discussed before this country and France had reached full agreement on the requirements for a true peace safeguarding their own security and that of other free nations in Europe".² While this was an expression of the allies' wish for unanimity, it showed that this had

¹*Hansard, Vol.359, Cols.40-41, 2nd April 1940. Chamberlain's statement to the House of Commons.*

²*Ibid, Col.41.*

not yet been achieved. The "requirements" for safeguarding the peace were things which were to be agreed in the future and in the light of any proposals that were made. They had not been agreed by March 1940. . Therefore, by a mixture of propaganda exercise and agreement about the future a potentially damaging division over war aims was prevented.

Because the Government would not countenance a catastrophic split with the French the image of unanimity was carefully fostered. At Birmingham on 24 February, in his famous "Hitler has missed the bus" speech, Chamberlain remarked on "an understanding so close" between the Allies that "the two Governments today think and act as one".¹ Such rhetoric was not representative of the Government's true position. As Sir Alec Cadogan reflected later, the British had been "induced to change their tune"² on the central war-aim question of whether objectives were anti-German or not. But this change was largely confined to propaganda. To the extent that the idea of a unity of aims between the allies was an illusion, it was a very carefully constructed and maintained illusion. The Foreign Office's preparation of an answer to a Parliamentary Question about the post-war future of Austria in May 1940 shows this clearly. It said "Austria is unfortunately one of the subjects about which we and the French may hold divergent views".³ Therefore the first consideration in a reply was to "not alienate the French". However, this apparent agreement contained within it another difficulty. They must also "not give the Germans a chance to say we are going to split up Germany",⁴ which was another of the factors which had

¹Quoted in FO 371/24362, 13th June 1940. *Official statements on war and peace aims*, document 8.

²FO 800/322, H/XXX/33, 25th July 1940.

³This was mainly due to the French declared intention of "righting the injustices imposed by force on Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland", whereas the British spoke only of "righting the wrongs done to Czechoslovakia and Poland". Both November, in replies to Dutch-Belgian mediation plan.

⁴FO 371/24362, 6th May 1940. See Hansard, 7th May for the reply. The success in presenting a united face was further evidenced by the German propagandists adoption of the idea that "an Allied victory implied the break-up of Germany into fragments". Cab 65/6, WM(40)67, 13th March. 1940.

to be considered before any announcement was made.

In the report in The Times of 29 November noted above, the Prime Minister laid out some of the parties interested in the nature of the peace, and therefore of peace aims. The Dominions and the Allies were to have an equal voice, and "it may be that the vanquished will also be taken into consultation before we can decide how the new and better world is to be laid out".¹ That the French should be involved in the process of establishing the Allies' aims was clear, yet given the previously mentioned differences there was never the co-operation that could have existed.

Not only was it intended that "vanquished" Germans be consulted about the post-war world, they were to be the targets of British propaganda. Much of this was aimed at reassuring them that Germany would not be partitioned or denied her rightful place in Europe. Therefore the preservation of the distinction between "German" and "Nazi" discussed earlier. This gave rise to statements such as that of Anthony Eden; "we have no quarrel with the German people, but there can be no lasting peace until Nazism ... is banished from the earth".² The thinking behind the adoption of such a propaganda position was similar to that of the Labour Party's policy declaration on "Labour, the War and The Peace" which said "if it is brought to the knowledge of the German people that they can have an honourable Peace under fair conditions, this might contribute to shortening the war".³ Ian McLaine in his book Ministry of Morale on the Ministry of Information and its work put this more explicitly; "As long as the Government cherished the forlorn hope that the Germans might overthrow their leaders, the Ministry of

¹*The Times*, 29th Nov.

²FO 371/24362. Eden broadcast to USA and Dominions, 11th Sept. The phrase "we have no quarrel with the German people" echoed Chamberlain.

³Philip Noel-Baker Papers, Churchill College, 9th Feb. 1940. "Declaration of policy by the National Executive of the Labour Party". NBKR 2/47.

Information was unable to tell the British people that they were pitted against a ruthless enemy ..."¹ Britain was, the MoI stressed, only fighting the German people to the extent that they had been bullied and dragooned by Hitler.² Yet, as noted earlier, this strand of thought was never allowed full sway. The objections of the French and the influence of ideas which stressed that the fact that five times during the last eighty years the rulers of Germany have embarked with only the slightest pretext, upon a war of aggression,³ could not be ignored.

There were, of course, other significant influences on the development of war aims themselves, rather than on their announcement. One of the most prevalent was the belief, or at least hope, that the war would end by an early German collapse. This would be caused by the internal weaknesses of the Nazi state. Some, like Lieutenant-General Brooke, later Lord Alanbrooke, held "that if internal conditions become critical the Germans will be forced to start some form of offensive".⁴ More usually, however, the connection was between Germany's bad "internal position" and her need for peace.⁵ Harold Nicolson reported a "general feeling in ministerial circles that the war will peter out before the Spring". However, he could find no "serious grounds for such optimism".⁶ Lord Lothian in a summary of what he thought to be Government policy wrote that the objective was to "produce a revolution inside Germany and end Hitler and his regime" within three years.⁷ And in answer to this Lord Chatfield replied that

¹ McLaine, p.142.

² R.A. Butler Papers, File 9/11, 6th Feb.1940. "Principles and Objectives of British Wartime Propaganda".

³ See Cadogan in FO 800/322, H/XXX/33, 25th July 1940.

⁴ Alanbrooke Diary, 21st Oct. Alanbrooke Collection 5/1.

⁵ As in the case of Admiral Cunningham's letters to Aunts, 23rd & 18th Oct., Cunningham Papers. Add Mss 52558.

⁶ Nicolson Diary, 25th Oct. Typescript.

⁷ Chatfield Papers, CHT/6/2, 3rd Nov. Lothian to Chatfield; Chatfield's reply, 27th Nov.

Germany would "break up under strain" of the blockade, although no time limit was placed on this collapse. The causes of Germany's expected internal disruption were two-fold; the economic and material deprivation caused by the blockade, and the psychological effect of fighting a monumentally unjust war. On the first point Admiral Cunningham wrote on 29 October "I doubt if he [Hitler] has supplies for more than another year",¹ while on the second, Chatfield wrote "... the German nation has no inspiration; they are defending injustices and will break up under the strain for lack of incentive".² At times it was only "war at close quarters" which would produce the desired change in Germany,³ but this would probably be a long way off. There is a great difference between the possibility of a future collapse and the belief that such a collapse might be so close that it ought to affect war aims and the way peace feelers were responded to, but at times peace through this method was felt to be close. This was held most deeply and expressed most clearly by the Prime Minister when he wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury on 27 December:

"I find war more hateful than ever and I groan in spirit over every life lost and every home blasted. But I am thankful that it is no worse and somehow I feel that before another Christmas comes, the war will be over. And then the trouble will really begin!"⁴

But how could the war end so soon? The only way was for an internal collapse of the Nazi state, most probably precipitated by the undermining of her economy. Much effort was spent in trying to cause this, for example the blockade and the whole work of the Ministry of Economic Warfare. Both the Ministry of Economic Warfare and the Political

¹Cunningham letter to his Aunts, 29th Oct. Add Mss 52558.

²Cunningham letter to his Aunts, 2nd Oct. Add Mss 52558.

³FO 800/309, 14th Dec. Halifax to meeting of Ministers.

⁴Chamberlain Papers, NC7/11/32, 27th Dec. Chamberlain to Cosmo Lang.

Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office made regular reports on Germany's state of impending collapse, reports which were mostly exercises in explaining why the collapse had not yet occurred. In November "the pressure of the Allied blockade is beginning to make itself felt", with increasing evidence of "apprehension about the future".¹ In early January "signs of strain" were evident but collapse was not imminent,² and later in the month the "malaise" and "downward trend" while continuing, had still not produced "signs of a break".³ It was only from mid-March that these reports began to stress the possible strength of the Nazi state;⁴ while less than two weeks before the attack on France on 10 May it was finally realised that "It would be a mistake to under-rate the strength of German patriotism and the staying power of the German people ...".⁵

Much of the reason for the persistence of this idea of the critical weakness of the Nazi state can be found in the misunderstanding, possibly wilful, of Hitler's Germany. Nowhere is this shown more clearly than in the Political Intelligence Department's report of 20 February.⁶

"The structure of the German homefront in 1940 is far less solid than in the early part of the last war. If this were not the case, there would be no reason for the denial of all freedom of speech, for the severe regimentation of opinion, the exclusion of all foreign news and the perpetual drumming of propaganda".

The assessment assumed that the restrictions on freedom of information and of the population were a response to a deep unease on the part of

¹ *Cab 68/3, WP (R)(39) 116, December. MEW report for November.*

² *FO 371/25235, 9th Jan. 1940, report No. 15.*

³ *Ibid, 23rd Jan. 1940, report No. 17. Both this report and the previously quoted one suggested that the desired collapse would only occur after a clear German defeat.*

⁴ *Ibid, 12th March 1940, No. 24. This being attributed to successful propaganda.*

⁵ *Ibid, 30th April 1940, No. 30.*

⁶ *Ibid, 20th Feb. 1940, No. 21.*

the Nazi hierarchy, rather than due to any desire to change or transform their society. Although it seems certain that elements of both existed, the very fact of Germany's longer survival in World War Two than in the 1914-18 conflict shows that German society was at least as resilient under Hitler as under the Kaiser. Such a perspective was, of course, not available at the time. One cannot escape the suspicion, however, that it was signs of weakness that were sought - and therefore found - rather than any evidence of cohesion and strength, and reports which stressed German power were played down. Such weaknesses as were found were inevitably linked with the Government's ideas about how the war would end.

Another concern when the question of war aims was being considered was whether active warfare either would occur, or should be made to occur. That there was at first little idea of escalating the war beyond the blockade and active naval defence cannot be denied. General Ironside was right that there was "a lack of plan" in the Cabinet with "wait and see" predominating,¹ but did this affect war aims? During the initial months of the war, when the idea of a quick negotiated peace was seen as a possibility, there was a clear reluctance to escalate the war, particularly by bombing.² Not only would this alienate the neutral States where support or non-belligerence was most important, but it would also lessen the chances of the German people overthrowing their Government. However, as the months went on it is possible to detect some moving away from the singular reliance on the blockade to make Germany crack. The Prime Minister's comment "I am beginning to wonder whether we shall do any good with them [the German people] unless they first get a real hard punch in the stomach"³ is the best example of this. Yet even then it would be quite wrong to believe

¹*Ironside Diary*, 18th Nov. p.158.

²Cab 99/3, SWC (39/40), 17th Nov. *Chamberlain's remarks*.

³*Chamberlain Papers*. Letter to sisters, 3rd Dec. NC 18/1/1133A.

that the Cabinet became convinced of the benefits of the offensive or of total war. Far from it; what mattered was to "show that the Allies possessed the initiative" by actions which "without aiming at being decisive"¹ would suitably impress German opinion. The attitude towards active warfare was ambivalent, and the link with war aims only partial.

Although Britain's war aims need not necessarily be achieved by any sort of military victory, and therefore active warfare could either precipitate or hinder peace, another significant influence was the psychological or morale dimension to the conflict. This had two aspects, the preservation of domestic morale and its destruction in Germany, and was well summed up by Pownall who wrote on 29 October:

"Maybe it will turn into a war of nerves almost entirely.

Home morale has of course always been important, now I think more than ever. Both we and the French have weak elements but surely we can outlast a nation which starts with so many early disadvantages - a leader who has a considerable, ... if intimidated, opposition ... A population that has been dragooned and living at war pressure for years already and who start on a very low scale of nourishment. If we can't last him out on morale we don't even deserve to survive".²

Pownall's assumptions, both about British and more particularly about German strength of morale, were widely held, but when it came to assessing the influence of various factors upon British war aims, the most important was the deep uncertainty about the future. There could, in the Prime Minister's words, "scarcely be a more difficult moment at which to indulge in speculation"³ about the future course of the war.

¹ *Cab 99/3, SWC (39/40), 6th Meeting, 28th March 1940.*

² *Pownall Diary, 29th Oct.*

³ *Hansard, Vol.356, Col.43, 16th Jan 1940.*

In such a "difficult moment" it was also hard to be exact about their objective. He continued;

"At the moment there is a lull in operations of war, but at any time that lull may be sharply broken, and events may occur which will reshape the history of the world. We, in this country, hope, as do the peoples of every nation, that the just and lasting peace which we are seeking will not be long delayed. On the other hand, it may well be that the war is about to enter upon a more acute phase. If that should prove to be the case, we are ready for it ..."

The Government could have reduced this uncertainty by closing off in advance some of the ways war could be ended, for example by deciding "not to end the war until Germany had been conquered". However, this was rejected in favour of leaving open all avenues which could lead to a real peace. Some of these avenues involved a military defeat of Germany and some did not. The Prime Minister, in his broadcast of 26 November, described the possibility of a German abandonment of aggression "without bloodshed" as a preferred option.¹ Cadogan, in January, still wondered what sort of a peace could be possible through a deal with the anti-Nazi forces in Germany.² As the Viceroy of India wrote "We have, too, to see what the course of the war is going to be and its outcome, and in what circumstances peace and the readjustments peace will involve" will have to be made. This was an attitude which prevailed at least throughout the "phoney" war.³

The Governments's determination was for a guaranteed peace, but the exact nature of the guarantee and of the peace were things which, despite speculation, would become apparent only at the time. Until then

¹ *The Times*, 27th Nov.

² FO 371/24362, 24th Jan. 1940. Cadogan Note.

³ India Office, Mss Eur D 609/19. Linlithgow to Secretary of State, Zetland, 26th April 1940.

"our immediate task must be to fight the war resolutely".¹ It was, even after six months of war, "clearly premature to specify the signatories of any peace or peace terms at the end of the war". The point being "to win it".²

When it came to the announcement of Britain's war aims, or more properly her "peace aims", the cardinal rule was again that they were "something to be achieved in conditions we cannot at present foresee."³ War aims were to defeat the enemy. By this the Prime Minister meant "not merely the defeat of the enemy's military forces. I mean the defeat of that aggressive, bullying mentality which seeks continually to dominate other peoples by force". Furthermore, if this end could be achieved "without bloodshed, so much the better". Peace aims would have to "take account of the condition which may be prevailing whenever the time comes to make peace".⁴ Not only this, to attempt to define objectives was full of danger. As Chamberlain commented on 28 November:

"It would be absolutely futile - indeed it would be worse than futile, it would be mischievous - if we were to attempt to lay down today the conditions in which the new world is to be created".⁵

But why was there so much reluctance to be specific in propaganda? The first element was that there was a genuine concern about the risks of making announcements which time might make them want to rescind. In order both to make peace as soon as genuinely possible and to minimise the risks to the future security of that peace, pledges and commitments were kept to a minimum. Yet it would be quite wrong to suppose that this was the

¹Prem 1/443. Chamberlain to Lord Holden, 10th April 1940.

²FO 371/24362, 6th March 1940. R.A. Butler's reply to Parliamentary Question by Mr Mander. See Hansard Vol. 358, Cols. 355-6.

³Chamberlain broadcast, 25th Nov. See *The Times*, 26th Nov.

Quoted in FO 371/24362 "British Official Pronouncements" on war aims.

⁴FO 371/24362. Halifax to House of Lords, 2nd Nov.

⁵FO 371/24362. *The Times*, 29th Nov.

only inhibiting factor. The argument about avoiding future trouble was also used to minimise potentially damaging disputes in the present. A great many interests had to be considered and pronouncements worded accordingly. For example, that the Dominions should wish to be kept informed and consulted on major events would have been expected,¹ but in terms of propaganda a good deal of attention was also paid to the neutral states. This was particularly the case in the "democratic neutral countries" where an anti-totalitarian tone would, it was hoped, "appeal to enlightened opinion".² The problem with this "enlightened" opinion was that it was felt to be vulnerable to the German charge that only Allied intransigence was refusing to end the war. Therefore "great care" was required when replying to such as the Belgian-Dutch offer of mediation in November.³ The countries whose opinions were seen to be of interest were widely spread,⁴ but by far the most significant was the USA. As Halifax wrote in December, propaganda in the United States "is a matter of the greatest importance, and one in which we cannot afford to put a foot wrong".⁵

As regards the making of peace, here the propaganda line was that "France and Britain, powerful as they are, cannot and do not want to settle the new Europe alone; others must come in and help us, in particular to bring about that disarmament which is an absolutely essential feature of any lasting peace".⁶ However, it should not be supposed that any attempt by neutral states - even the USA - to influence a peace conference against Allied wishes would have been tolerated. The Allies' task was to make themselves be seen as the champions of the democratic ideal against a

¹For examples of this see Cab 67/2, WP(G)(39)74, 76, 91, Nov.

²FO 371/22946, 20th Oct. Sir Cecil Dormer, Ambassador in Oslo.

³Cab 65/2, WM (39)75, 8th Nov. Halifax's comment. This was a recurrent theme.

⁴India Office, L/P+S/12/315, 15th Nov., a circular asking for comment on various propaganda lines from British posts in the Middle East, Persia and Afghanistan.

⁵Beaverbrook Papers, BBK c/152, 16th Dec. Halifax to Beaverbrook.

⁶FO 371/24362, 24th Feb. 1940.

brutal despotism. By so doing they sought to overcome the very natural fear of the European neutrals, and the equally strong disinclination to get involved [again] felt in the United States.

Yet not only was the propaganda's purpose to stir up the martial spirit of the potentially faint hearted, it was also governed by the desire not to promise the impossible or to create conditions which might force the Government's hand when it came to peace.¹ This last point was clearly demonstrated in the discussions about Reith's memorandum. He originally wanted to write: "A compromise peace with an unbeaten Germany would be a defeat in the long run.

Victory means:

- (a) Release for Germany's victims;
- (b) The right to live, think, vote, talk and worship
God as you please;
- (c) That the new world which must rise from the war will
be Christian and not Satanic, spiritual and not
material".

Instead, Cabinet agreed that the phrase about a compromise peace being a defeat should be omitted, and that the phrase "No peace could be justified which does not serve these results" should be inserted at the end.²

Until now the discussion of war aims has been restricted to their nature and development. However, there is the difference between what were seen as war aims and what as peace aims, or "post-war aims".³

Although on occasion the distinction between "war" and "peace" aims was reduced to the obvious, such as Oliver Stanley's "I have only

¹*Cab 67/4, WP(G)(40)20, Jan.-Feb. 1940.*

²*See final version of Note 1, Feb 1940. BBC(WAC) R34/258.*

³*FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/26, 24th Oct. Rex Leeper's description.*

one war aim, to win the war; only one peace aim, that the peace shall be lasting",¹ the first serious discussion took place within the Foreign Office in October. Cadogan, however, found the distinction "loose" and unsatisfactory. Under war aims came both the reasons for taking up arms and the objective of delivering "non-German populations from domination and terrorism". Whereas for peace aims "it is really impossible to frame any definite proposals".² Nevertheless this did not deter Chamberlain from expanding upon the distinction in a broadcast of 26 November.

"In my own mind I make a distinction between War Aims and Peace Aims. Our war aims can be stated very shortly. It is to defeat our enemy, and by that I do not merely mean the defeat of our enemy's military forces. I mean the defeat of that aggressive bullying mentality which seeks continually to dominate other people by force, which finds a brutal satisfaction in the persecution and torture of inoffensive citizens, and in the name of the interests of the State justifies the repudiation of its own pledged word whenever it finds it convenient. If the German people can be convinced that that spirit is as bad for themselves as for the rest of the world they will abandon it. If we can secure that they abandon it without bloodshed so much the better; but abandoned it must be. That is our war aim and we shall persevere in this struggle until we have attained it.

When we come to peace aims we are dealing with something to be achieved in conditions we cannot at present foresee".³

¹*Daily Telegraph*, 5th Feb. 1940. Report of Stanley's speech of the previous day in Newcastle upon Tyne.

²FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/50, Nov.

³Chamberlain Broadcast, 26th Nov.; *The Times*, 27th Nov.

This theme was picked up the following week by Harold Nicolson when he emphasised how wide was the agreement with what the Prime Minister had said.¹ There was a good deal of attention paid to the discussion of what sort of peace should follow the allied victory and a general feeling that "war is not enough".² In January 1940 Attlee had spoken of the need for "a peace based on the acceptance of principles which will prevent future wars",³ and the previous month Chamberlain had succinctly summed up the war aims versus peace aims distinction by writing of the Nazis; "We must finish with this system once and for all [the "war" aim]. When that has been achieved we shall be in a position to lay the solid foundations of a better world [the "peace" aim]".⁴

Despite this discussion of the differences between war and post-war aims, it was far more usual for the two to be treated as one. Part of the reason for this was that peace aims were dependent on the situation which existed at the end of the war, therefore little precision was possible. But it was also an unnecessary distinction and one which did not help to clarify what these aims should be. Therefore, it is a distinction which has not been closely adhered to in this thesis as this is a more representative treatment of the contemporary discussion.

Whether it was a matter of war or of post-war policy, the question of the Government's attitude towards Hitler remains. Although clearly he was regarded as the originator of the conflict, many of the leading members of the Government appeared most reluctant to stick to the conclusion that he could not be negotiated with.

On 1 March, Lord Ponsonby records that Lord Halifax had told him that "We've never said we won't deal with Hitler but that we cannot

¹BBC(WAC) R34/876, 4th Dec. Of this Brendan Bracken wrote sarcastically to Beaverbrook "You probably heard the coroner's broadcast and now clearly understand our war and peace aims". Bbk c/56, 29th Nov.

²INF 1/867. Memorandum on "Home Front Propaganda". Spring 1940.

³Attlee Papers, Speech at Blackburn, Jan. 1940. Mss Attlee Dep.1.

⁴Chamberlain Papers, NC7/11/32. Letter to Howard Griffen MP, 9th Dec.

trust him or Germany under the Nazi Regime", and that it was impossible to negotiate with Hitler without indisputable guarantees that he would keep his word.¹ Halifax's comment that negotiations with Hitler would only be possible if he was no longer a Nazi seems to be both curiously unreal and trying to keep the door to peace open and yet close it at the same time. These were typical characteristics of many comments about the possibility of talks at some stage with Hitler, the topic being either ambivalent or clear only through what was omitted. This was well illustrated by the following passages. The reply of 13 October to Hitler's speech of a week earlier "went as far as practicable" in defining war aims, but one of these was that it was "up to German Government to make proposals and to give concrete evidence of its pacific intentions".² In early December, Halifax made a similar point in the House of Lords when he said that the first prerequisite for peace was "evidence that the German Government were willing to accept terms which would correspond to the purposes for which we took up arms".³ This idea was further refined when on 20 January the Foreign Secretary said that "The only reason why peace cannot be made tomorrow is that the German Government have, as yet, given no evidence whatsoever" of their readiness to repair the damage they had caused or of their willingness to stand by their pledged word. On these three occasions, the British Government declared itself willing to discuss terms with "the German Government". It was not just "a" German Government, but the one which was then existing, that is Hitler's Government.

The Government were, of course, fully aware of the "Difficulties

¹*Ponsonby Papers, Mss Eng Hist c682. Ponsonby's record of interview with Halifax. Although Halifax was trying to prevent Ponsonby asking for a Secret Session of Parliament, there is no reason to doubt the report. 1st March. 1940.*

²FO 800/310, 20th Oct. Foreign Office summary of the European situation for Lothian's "personal and confidential information" only.

³*The Times*, 6th Dec. Speech of 5th Dec., quoted in FO 371/24362.

of dealing with Hitler",¹ and what really mattered was "making it plain to the German people that the Hitler system of force has failed".² Or, as it was phrased on another occasion, that "the net result" of negotiations should be such as to bring "discredit to Hitler".³

These last quotations seem to envisage a diplomatic defeat, preferably an acute one, being sufficient, and yet elsewhere the required preliminary is a change of heart far more fundamental than any mere diplomatic humiliation. The question "Would the Government negotiate with Hitler?" was rarely asked, so it is difficult to answer. Sumner Welles recognised the problems thus raised when he acknowledged that although only peace terms which stipulated that Hitler could retain an important role in Germany had any chance of succeeding, such terms would "raise a very difficult question for the Allies in view of their resolve, at the outcome of the war, to achieve security against further aggression in the future".⁴ Welles' statement shows his perception of the extreme British reluctance to talk with Hitler. Yet the fact of him making it in such a way also demonstrates that consideration of this question had not already been ruled out. It may have been "too late for that sort of arrangement",⁵ but if so, neither Sumner Welles' conclusions nor the evidence of the above Government statements on the matter showed this clearly.

The only time that the question of whether Britain would refuse to make peace with the Nazis was put, by Labour's Hugh Dalton, Halifax replied "that some of his colleagues, such as Winston, say this sort of thing. He himself prefers not to incur charges of hubris, but his conditions of peace would be such that Hitler would not be able to accept them".⁶ This

¹ FO 800/324, 11th March 1940. R. Skrine Stevenson to Sir Alexander Hardinge. re-Welles.

² FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/63, 4th March 1940.

³ FO 800/325, H/XXXII/10, 15th Dec. Conversation between Bishop of Oslo and, probably, Halifax.

⁴ Cab 65/6. WM (40) 67, 13th March 1940.

⁵ Chamberlain to his sisters, 10th Dec. NC 18/1/1134.

⁶ Dalton Diary, mid-Feb., 1940. Part 1/22.

studiously all-encompassing reply is probably the best statement of the Government's thinking on the matter. A few Ministers would not agree to talks with Hitler, but most felt unable to commit themselves in advance. They did not relish the prospect of talks with Hitler, and were keen to show that he would never even consider their terms. Yet were Hitler willing to accept the British terms, then the Government had said nothing which would make talks impossible.

Before finally reaching the conclusion that talks with Hitler were not ruled out, it must be asked whether the Government were saying this in other ways. To support such a contention one could cite the use of the term "Hitlerism". Because they did not want to further unite the German people to Hitler, it was held to be unwise to attack him too frequently, therefore a convenient subject - in this case the defeat of "Hitlerism" - was used as a substitute. For example, on 13 September Chamberlain spoke of "the menace of Hitlerism" being "finally removed",¹ and on 26 February a Times leader article reported that "The war aims can be stated in three words - defeat of Hitlerism".² The speech upon which this was a commentary was, however, described by the Sunday Express as omitting "the old ban on dealing with Hitler".³ What The Times was commenting on was Chamberlain's statement that:

"We must have tangible evidence that will satisfy us that any pledges or assurances given will be fulfilled. Under the present German Government there can be no security for the future ...

It is therefore for Germany to take the next step and show

¹FO 371/24362, 13th Sept. Speech in House of Commons.

²This was commenting on Chamberlain's speech at Birmingham, 24th Feb. 1940, which was fully reported in The Times, 26th Feb. 1940.; See also FO371/24362, Eden on 29th Feb, "... until Hitlerism and the international gangsterism for which it stands is utterly and finally destroyed, there is going to be neither security for the present nor hope for the future".

³Sunday Express, 25th Feb. 1940.

us that she has once and for all abandoned the thesis that might is right".¹

This comes very close to putting a ban on Hitler,² but the Prime Minister was careful to put the emphasis on the need for "security in the future".

It is possible to find a few unequivocal statements rejecting the idea of peace with Hitler, but not all that many. On 12 November, Chamberlain wrote of the need for someone "to push him [Hitler] out of the way before anything can be done",³ while on 19 December he told the Supreme War Council that "the mere downfall of Hitler was not a sufficient guarantee of lasting peace".⁴ During the Summer Welles' visit, Chamberlain "laid great emphasis upon the impossibility of trusting Hitler",⁵ and told the Dominions that "no confidence was possible while Hitler and the Nazis were in control of Germany".⁶ Yet these were exceptions to the general rule. More usually statements were such as "as things stand at present, I think it impossible for either us or the French to enter into discussion of any proposals with the present Government of Germany".⁷ As things stood at that time, there was neither a need nor an advantage to be gained from such negotiations, but what the future held could not be known. In conclusion, it is possible to discern some clear lines of thought about the Government's view of peace talks with Hitler. Firstly, the war was said to be not one against Hitler himself. It was a war against "aggression". As the Prime Minister

¹*The Times*, 26th Feb. 1940.

²Even when Chamberlain agrees that King Leopold should be informed that Britain "thought it impossible for Hitler to make any proposals which His Majesty's Government could look at", the attitude is not one of a complete ban. Letter to King Leopold from Sir Roger Keyes, Prem 1/380, 18th May 1940.

³Chamberlain letter to sisters, 12th Nov. NC 18/1/1131.

⁴Cab 99/3, Supreme War Council minutes, SWC (39/40) 4th Meeting, 19th Dec.

⁵FO 371/24406, 11th March 1940. Telegram to Lothian; see also Simon, 13th March 1940, "... it is impossible to reach any settlement worth anything so long as Hitler and those colleagues who think like them are in power"., FO 371/24362.

⁶FO 371/24406, 13th March 1940. Telegram to the Dominion Governments.

⁷FO 800/311, H/XV/395. Halifax to Lothian, 21st Nov.

wrote on 12 February "what we are in fact fighting is aggression. Aggression had been, and there is certainly no evidence that it has ceased to be, the policy of Hitler. That is why we make war against Hitler".¹ It follows from this that the objective of the war was to defeat Hitler's policy of aggression, known as "Hitlerism". And to do this "... the one thing that we cannot do is to allow Hitler to leave this war in a position where he can with plausible argument leave Germany still convinced that he has not been unsuccessful in getting away with it".² This point was made rather more clearly by the Prime Minister when asked, by Sumner Welles, "Would the British Government feel it still impossible to deal with the present regime" if arrangements could be reached over Poland, Czechoslovakia and disarmament? To this the Prime Minister replied that: "in his own view this would be so, but this opinion he expressed not on any personal ground, but because Herr Hitler personified a system and method with which the British Government had learned from bitter experience it was impossible to make terms. In any case what was quite essential was that any settlement should not be such that Herr Hitler could represent it as having been able to "get away with it". We could not be satisfied with any settlement from which it did not clearly emerge that Herr Hitler's policy had been a failure."

War was against Hitler's aggressive policies and therefore it must be made fully clear that Hitler had failed. The question of whether there could be peace talks with Hitler thus became; could there be peace talks with Hitler which clearly showed that his aggressive policies had been defeated? As the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary talked further with Welles, this question was also answered. Halifax said that Britain's attitude depended on three factors:

"(1) Restoration and reparation for Poland, Bohemia and

¹Prem 1/443, 12th Feb. 1940.

²FO 800/325, H/XXXIX/34, Nov. Halifax to Sir Percy Chetwode.

Moravia; and freedom of decision for Austria;

- (2) The relative strength of Great Britain and France vis-a-vis Germany;
- (3) Real restoration of liberty to the German people, by which they would be freed from the Gestapo and the whole system of persecution, and be again permitted to have knowledge of the outside world ..."

Halifax continued "... if it were ever possible to see these several things realised, there would clearly be such a new situation, and one that would indicate such a complete reversal of Herr Hitler's policy that we should be not justified in refusing discussion". Therefore peace could be discussed with Hitler upon very straight terms, with the liberalisation of Germany as, apparently, the main guarantee of future peace and evidence of the required change of heart. The telegram continued "The Prime Minister said he would not differ from this statement, but it was generally agreed that such a transformation would be in the nature of a miracle". It would be an overstatement to say that British policy was relying on a "miracle", but it was at least designed to accommodate that "miracle" were it to occur. And if it did not occur then nothing had been lost. Although peace could be discussed with Hitler the likelihood of this taking place was remote in the extreme. Peace was not discussed because the British Government did not agree to the terms Hitler offered - not because they refused to contemplate talking peace with Hitler. This difference may seem irrelevant with hindsight, but had the Germans not attacked in the West, it would have assumed a far greater significance.

CHAPTER 6

THE ASSESSMENT OF THE WAR, EARLY MAY 1940

Having established that the main objective of the British Government was to secure an effectively guaranteed peace with Germany, it is now necessary to analyse the effects of the crushing blow received by the Allies during the Battle of France on this policy. To do this it will be necessary to sketch a brief outline of the British Government's view of the war at the beginning of May and assess the importance of the Battle of France for the conduct of the war, before concentrating more fully on the actual development of policy itself.

On 4 May the Cabinet considered the Chiefs of Staff's "Review of the strategical situation on the assumption that Germany has decided to seek a decision in 1940".¹ The importance of this document lies in its assessment of the relative likelihood of an attack on Britain or on France, of the consequent recommendations to meet such threats, and also in its brief discussion of whether the "assumption" of its title was a valid one.

When considering a German attempt to seek a decision in 1940, the Chiefs of Staff began by saying, "The most likely method by which she might attempt to achieve this object is by a major offensive against Great Britain". Even allowing for national bias in their planning, the Chiefs of Staff view of an air, rather than a land, offensive shows the downgrading of the French front which characterised the "phoney war" period from about November 1939.² Although such an attack was a "possibility" which "we cannot ignore", it was felt that there were "at present sufficient land forces to maintain the security of the French territory against both Germany and Italy, if adequate air

¹*Cab 66/7 WP (40)145, 4th May. All references are to 1940.*

²*For example Chamberlain's persistent idea that the Germans would not attack in France.*

protection and support is provided".¹ This last "if" was recognised to be a serious one, but later, in the Annex to the report, it was stated that "Nevertheless, it seems probable that existing strengths are sufficient to deny the enemy the full advantages of air superiority over the Army front ...".² Indeed, while it was felt that the "104 Allied Divisions in France" should be "reasonably secure against land attack",³ there were recommendations that "every possible step should be taken to hasten" production and training in all branches of Britain's air defences, "even at the temporary expense of our long-term programme".⁴ This last phrase, taken with the final sentence of the conclusions which stated that "in putting these recommendations into effect, financial considerations should not be allowed to stand in the way", represent the only real signs of urgency about the whole report. The reason for this general lack of urgency can be found in the first page of its annex, which referred to the "assumption that Germany has decided to seek a decision in 1940" as really a "supposition",⁵ and devoted a paragraph to the suggestion that "Germany is not seeking a very rapid decision".⁶ Because of the weight of this last argument, and also probably due to the expected reaction of the Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff supported their call for increased production and speed of preparation to meet a German attack by asking that it be borne in mind "that many of the factors discussed below are equally applicable to the German policy outlined in paragraph 2 above [i.e. that they would not seek a decision in 1940] as to a policy leading to a direct attack on Great Britain and France".⁷

When considering the argument in favour of Germany not attacking

¹*Cab 66/7 WP (40)145, p.1, parag. 2(e). 4th May.*

²*Ibid, p.6, parag. 21.*

³*Ibid, p.5, parag. 20.*

⁴*Ibid, p.2, parag. 3(a).*

⁵*Ibid, p.3, parag. 2.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

Britain and France in 1940 and instead concentrating on developing her gains in Scandinavia and possibly in the Balkans, the Chiefs of Staff noted that Germany might thus be put "in a position to seek peace terms with some chance of gaining thereby considerable and permanent advantages tantamount to victory. Furthermore, Germany may hope to carry through such a plan without the heavy losses that a direct attack on the West might entail".¹ The Chiefs of Staff, then, were not fully convinced that Germany would attack or that it was even in her best interests to do so. Therefore there was a real possibility that the Germans might allow the "phoney war" to continue for the rest of the year. Any decision to end the minimal land and air war being fought would have to be taken by Hitler. As far as the Chiefs of Staff were concerned, not only did they not advocate the Allies taking the initiative, they did not even mention it. When referring to the use of air power, their attitude was still that "We should as far as possible, therefore, conserve our striking force to counter any enemy action ...",² and, lest it be thought that the decision to assist the Norwegians had been designed to take the initiative in any other than the economic war,³ the Chiefs of Staff described the intervention as an attempt "to convert the invasion of Norway [by the Germans] into the maximum embarrassment and diversion of effort for Germany without dangerously weakening our essential security elsewhere".⁴

The "phoney war" was therefore still in full swing during the first week of May 1940 as far as the Chiefs of Staff were concerned and there is no evidence to suggest that the Prime Minister and most of the Cabinet thought otherwise. There had been warnings of a possible attack in France, but there had been warnings before which had come to nothing.

¹*Ibid.*

²*Ibid.*, p.6, parag. 22.

³*See earlier for perceived differences between economic and other sorts of warfare.*

⁴*Cab 66/7, WP(40)145, p.6, parag. 28, 4th May.*

As Sir Alec Cadogan noted at the beginning of May, "It looks like one of the periodical barrages of false stories. But we never know",¹ and anyway the allied armies felt they were ready to meet an attack. On what was referred to as the 'Home Front', although there was great clamour for a more vigorous war leadership, there was little call for immediate bombing of Germany, and none for an attack on the Western Front, while at the BBC, the home policy board was asked whether it thought Duff Cooper's St. George's Day speech was "too bloodthirsty"² - hardly a reflection of a society eager for 'total war'.

The long anticipated, but never fully expected, escalation of the war occurred on the morning of 10 May 1940 with the German attack on Holland, Belgium and France. As the BEF and the French rushed through Belgium to meet the German army, the air was full of expectancy as well as aircraft. "Well we are off", as Major-General Pakenham-Walsh wrote in his diary.³ The decisive moment had come. What was not fully clear, however, was exactly where the Germans were aiming for; whether the land attack on the Low Countries and Northern France was a direct attempt to knock out the French, or a preliminary to the air assault of Britain. As Major-General Pownall noted, Hitler could have been "keeping a good deal" of his airforce "up his sleeve until he can get on terms with England. We shall see".⁴ Despite doubts as to the ultimate objective of the attack, it was certainly very

¹FO 371/24381, c6281/5/18, 11th May 1940. Other officials were sometimes more sceptical; one noted "The Germans are amusing themselves again at our expense?" In fact a list of "more reliable rumours" received by the Quai d'Orsay since the beginning of 1940 recorded that there had been 36 definite reports of the date of the German attack, and that only the last two - from Bucharest and the Pope - had got the date correct. However these correct messages were not the first from each source: the dates of January, 15th February and early April had been received before from the Papacy, and of March and April from Bucharest. FO 371/24381, c6809/5/18.

²BBC(WAC) Home Policy Board, 3rd May 1940.

³Pakenham-Walsh Diary, 10th May 1940. King's College London. Diary No. 10.

⁴Pownall Diary, 10th May 1940.

serious, although on 10 May just how serious could not be envisaged.

The German attack was, of course, not the first dramatic event of the month, as it coincided with the formation of a new Government in Britain. A "Government of victory"¹ the Daily Telegraph called it, but one that nevertheless had its foundations in the defeat in Norway. Churchill's Government was greeted as one "in the truest sense national, able to summon to their highest point all the energies of our people", indeed as one fully suitable to "these first days of real war".² It was only at this time, after the attack in France, that the 'phoney war' ended, and the "real war" began. Neville Chamberlain "could not but feel relieved that the final responsibility was off him" now that "the war was becoming intense".³ His successor, however, took up this burden with "buoyancy and hope", because, as he continued, "I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men".⁴ This speech, the famous "blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech, Churchill's first as Prime Minister, revealed not just the difference in policy [and even more in rhetoric] of the new Administration compared with the old one, but also a deep realisation of the significant events taking place on the Western Front. Describing the situation as "the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history ...", Churchill continued:

"You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God has given us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite

¹*Daily Telegraph*, Leader Column, 11th May 1940.

²*Evening Standard*, Leader Article, 13th May 1940.

³*Chamberlain to Halifax*, Halifax Diary, 15th May 1940. A7.8.4.

⁴*Hansard*, 13th May 1940, Column 1502. Vol.360.

of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival."

The Prime Minister's declaration that the British Government's policy was to "wage war ... with all our might", and that its aim was "victory at all costs", was not just impressive rhetoric, it was also a totally new description of the Government's objectives. Even allowing for their different styles of oratory, Chamberlain had never expressed the ideas that Churchill did. The phoney war was over, unlimited war had begun. In Cadogan's words "Cabinet this morning decided to start bombing the Ruhr. Now the "Total War" begins!"¹ What, therefore, can be said of the search for a guaranteed peace? There is no doubt that in the immediate aftermath of the German attack on the Western Front, it was the search for victory over Germany that mattered. Had the German advance been halted in Belgium, then there is every chance that this single aim of victory would have been continued. There was of course no opportunity for this to be considered. Whether if Germany had been checked in Belgium the hope of a settlement would have returned or the stalemate of the Great War repeated cannot be known. However, the advance was not halted, it became a rout, and the changing military position brought a change of Government policy as the pressing need became not "victory" but "survival". In short, as it turned out, the pursuance of a guaranteed peace had not so much been cancelled as postponed.

It was indeed the changing military situation which became of overwhelming significance to the future of the war during the month after 10 May and it is to the repercussions of this that we must now turn. As the inexorable advance of the German blitzkrieg continued,

¹*Cadogan Diaries, 15th May. p.283. The automatic association of strategic bombing with 'Total War' was widespread at the time, and, as stated earlier, was one of the main arguments against the earlier use of the bomber.*

the battle in France began to take on a new significance. If this battle was lost, then would the war be lost also? This was a question which faced, in its different ways, both the British and the French in May and early June 1940. It was a question which, as the diary of C.I.G.S. General Ironside shows, was quickly raised despite being totally unexpected. Only five days after the outbreak of real hostilities, he wrote "The year may see us beaten ...",¹ but this was not yet in expectation of defeat, merely the airing of a possibility, an attitude accurately mirrored by Oliver Harvey on the previous day when he wrote "if and when we do win this war".² That the possibility of defeat was unexpected is also stated in Ironside's diary entry for 15 May. In a sentence which could serve as an epitaph to the inactivity of the previous nine months he wrote, "Nobody believed that we should be engaged in war, certainly not in a death struggle so soon. We made no preparations, even for war industry to be developed, and we cannot catch up".³ The Allies had been caught by surprise in "a death struggle" in France and Belgium. This battle was totally different from that in Poland or Norway and could not be glossed over as they had been. The battle of France mattered, and because of this, the growing awareness of defeat in France ran like seismic waves through both London and Paris.

As P.M.H. Bell writes in "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality", "the realisation that France might collapse came remarkably early in the course of the battle ...".⁴ When on 13 May, the day Guderian's forces crossed the Meuse, Churchill told the Cabinet that he was "by no means sure that the great battle was developing", General Ironside agreed, but also added that it would be

¹*Ironside Diary, 15th May. p.310. See Chapter 1, p.33, Note 1.*

²*Harvey Diary, 14th May. Add Mss 56396.*

³*Ironside Diary, 15th May. p.310.*

⁴*P.M.H. Bell, A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France. London: Saxon House, 1974. p.31. Subsequently: Bell.*

clear within the next two days.¹ By 15 May, not only was it indeed clear that this was "the great battle", but also that it was "developing" in an alarmingly adverse way. Thus, after less than a week of fighting, the spectre of defeat, not just in the present battle, but possibly in the war as well, had begun to raise its head.

From 16 May 1940 for the rest of the summer, British policy was tied to immediate military events in a way it had not been before. For some time the whole question of the future of the war hung in the balance. On 16 May Neville Chamberlain, in response to US Ambassador Kennedy's statement that he didn't see how Britain could carry on without the French, replied "I told him I did not see how we could either".² A day later Ironside wrote that "Chamberlain looked worn and ill but undismayed",³ yet Sir Samuel Hoare, shortly to depart as Ambassador to Spain, reported a conversation with the former Prime Minister that revealed that he was far from "undismayed". Hoare noted "Neville completely knocked out. Everything finished. The USA no good. "We could never get our army out, or if we did, it would be without any equipment"."⁴ Chamberlain seemed to have recovered somewhat from this state of extreme pessimism when writing to Lord Simon on 24 May. "The situation keeps one on tenterhooks", he wrote, "In a couple of days one will probably know which way the balance is going".⁵ Two days later was, of course, the date of the visit of the French Premier, Reynaud, and "the balance" was clearly going against the Allies. The discussions of 26 to 28 May need to be viewed in the context of these waves of panic. It would be wrong, however, to single out Chamberlain's morale alone as suffering during the crisis as his feelings were shared by many others in the run up to Dunkirk. Sir

¹Bell, page 32. This book gives the best in-depth account of the events of May and June 1940.

²Chamberlain Diary, 16th May. NC 2/24a.

³Ironside Diary, 17th May. p.314.

⁴Hoare Diary, 18th May. Vol.XII/2.

⁵Simon Papers, 24th May. Mss Simon 86.

Henry Channon's diary records of the "Nazis" offensive against Paris, "if they fail, which is possible, the war may yet be won for us",¹ which was a very big 'if' to build a policy on - and one which was no longer an 'if' a few days later. Gladwyn Jebb, Halifax's Private Secretary talked to Hugh Dalton of Hitler being crowned "Emperor of Europe with the iron crown of Charlemagne" and said that "Sir H.Q. [Horace Wilson, alias Quisling]" would "come back again in order to negotiate our surrender".² There were reports of "defeatism in London among the richer classes".³ Even Sir Alex Cadogan was affected by this depressed mood, noting on 20 May, "A miracle may save us: otherwise we're done - Reynaud told the truth to the Senate this afternoon".⁴ C.I.G.S. Ironside was already having doubts about the withdrawal of the BEF on 21 May, although these did not concern the wisdom of it, rather the feasibility. "Personally I think we cannot extricate the BEF. Only hope a march south-west. Have they the time? Have they the food? God help the BEF".⁵ The fate of the BEF was to become a crucial issue in the debate over war policy in the following days, as without the BEF the risks from invasion multiplied considerably. Henry Channon decided that, in view of this danger, he ought to bury his diaries, so that "perhaps some future generations will dig them up".⁶

It would of course be wrong to think that everyone suffered from a sense of imminent doom. Hugh Dalton, after contemplating the idea of "Hitler as Emperor of Europe and King of England", added "But we are an immense distance from such large catastrophes as yet",⁷ although they were possibly closer than Dalton could imagine. Geoffrey Dawson, editor of The Times, wrote on 18 May that "E [Halifax] looked better

¹Channon Diary, 17th May. p.253.

²Dalton Diary, 17th May. Part 1/22.

³Harvey Diary, 19th May. Add Mss 56396.

⁴Cadogan Diaries, 20th May. p.287.

⁵Ironside Diary, 21st May. p.327.

⁶Channon Diary, 23rd May. p.254.

⁷Dalton Diary, talk with Hugh Gaitskell, 22nd May. Part 1/22.

and was more cheerful about the battle",¹ suggesting that, like Chamberlain, the Foreign Secretary was subject to waves of hope and despondency. R.A. Butler, Halifax's Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, appeared to be one of the few people who knew the extent of the disaster who remained assured of the outcome. Channon noted that "Rab rang up to ask how I was - he remains confident of ultimate triumph".² Ironside's entry in his diary for 17 May, as well as describing Chamberlain as "undismayed" recorded that "There was no panic in the Cabinet, but they were all clear as to the serious nature of the crisis. Attlee said little ... Winston very red-eyed and more like an old boar in a corner than anything else".³ Although Ironside, as the comment on Chamberlain shows, was not always the most perceptive of diarists, there were indeed few signs of panic in Whitehall; but there were absolutely no illusions as to the extremely serious, probably decisive, nature of the crisis that had arisen, and this realisation raised the question of Britain's response. At the same time as the French were deciding whether to continue the war if their armies were defeated, there were parallel thoughts about how Britain would and could proceed in such an eventuality. The discussions in London never progressed as far as they did in Paris, but this was mostly because the German Army never crossed the Channel; had they done it would have been a very different story. That Britain would not be invaded could not, of course, be foreseen during May 1940. Similarly the fact that the war would last another five years and end victoriously was also a matter purely for the future. Consequently there was a re-evaluation of Government policy as a response to the emerging disaster in France, and it is the process of this re-evaluation that will be discussed.

¹*Dawson Diary*, 18th May. *Mss Dawson 44*.

²*Channon Diary*, 25th May. p.254. See also R.A. Butler papers, Letter to Professor Gupta, 17th May and to de Courcy, 22nd May. Files E3/7., and E3/4.

³*Ironside Diary*, 17th May. p.314.

In a memorandum on 'Civilian Morale', produced by the Ministry of Information on 22 May 1940, the consensus of public opinion during the 'phoney war' was painfully summed up:

"People were optimistic about the outcome of the war, and complacent about the present. There was an exaggerated belief in our armaments and defences, in our own moral strength in relation to Germany's moral weakness. Wishful thinking was the order of the day ... For the first seven months, nothing disturbed popular belief that by waiting we should win the war".¹

This complacency was rudely shattered by the second week of the German advance, but what would replace it was not yet clear. One alternative was, of course, the Churchillian line of all-out victory, as stated, before the crisis emerged, on 13 May in the House of Commons. This found an echo in, among other places, the leader column of the Evening Standard on 18 May; "... we do not consider defeat as a possible outcome of this struggle",² and in a letter from Lionel Curtis to Lord Halifax; "Nothing which happens, or can happen, will shake my faith in the ultimate triumph of right over wrong".³ However, as both Curtis and the title of the Evening Standard leader column admit, belief in "ultimate triumph" and the impossibility of "defeat" were matters of "faith" as there were very few more tangible reasons for such a conviction. Government policy is not usually built upon faith - unless that can be described as wishful thinking - and it was therefore deemed necessary "to consider how we proceed when France has capitulated and we are left alone. Just as well to prepare for that".⁴ Even the Evening Standard, by 24 May, had changed

¹INF 1/264, 18th May.

²Evening Standard, 18th May, "Faith".

³Halifax Papers, Lionel Curtis to Halifax, 18th May. A2.278.16/61.

⁴Cadogan Diary, 17th May, of Halifax's thinking at that time, ACAD 1/9.

its tune and was warning its readers;

"First let us have no ostrichism in our preparations against an invasion of this island. There are still some who scorn the idea. Can Hitler succeed where Napoleon failed? No, they say, the Channel is impregnable, just as others told us some weeks ago that the Meuse was impregnable. We would do better to prepare for the worst".¹

On 18 May the Committee under Chamberlain, set up the day before to examine the consequences of the French Government's possible abandonment of Paris and the withdrawal of the BEF, reported to the Cabinet on "the situation in which we might find ourselves obliged to continue our resistance single-handed in this country ..."² This was indeed one of the alternatives, i.e. that Britain would continue the fight alone, and it was the one Churchill and most of his Government were determined to pursue. Attlee, in a broadcast of 22 May, tried to scale-down the magnitude of the disaster;

"I am sure that you all realise that the war has reached a critical stage. A great battle is proceeding in the North of France. We cannot tell yet what will be the issue.

I want to appeal to all of you to do your utmost to help. Above all, don't get rattled. There is no justification for it. With brave hearts and cool heads we shall come through this ordeal triumphantly ... Victory is our goal: we must, we shall achieve it".³

¹*Evening Standard*, 24th May, "Ostrichism". Presumably the leader writer had first removed the sand from his own eyes before this enjoinder to others to do likewise.

²Bell, page 33.

³Attlee Papers, 22nd May. Mss Attlee Dep.1.

Such appeals as this, and the Evening Standard's recollection of the "miracle" of Cromwell's victory at Dunbar, which "shaped for years to come" the "whole history of mankind",¹ were all very well as nerve-steadiers during the period when the battle hung in the balance. What they did not provide, however, was a useful guide once the issue of the battle had been decided adversely. The pace of military developments makes the precise date of pronouncements on Government policy particularly important. It is clearly misleading to assume that Churchill's "victory" speech of 13 May² was a guide in the totally different military position twelve days later. What also must be borne in mind is that the assumed link in Attlee's broadcast between coming "through this ordeal triumphantly" and the goal of "victory" which "we must, we shall, attain" was by no means always present. As will be shown later, short-term survival did not necessarily mean that the Government would continue the fight until it achieved "victory".

As has been said, the pronouncements of 22 May were made in the light of the military situation as it existed at that time, and by the following day it was clear that this situation was likely only to get worse. On this date, Churchill reported to Cabinet that both the C.I.G.S. Ironside and his Vice-Chief, Dill, were "of the view that it was better that the operation [in support of the French] should continue, since, if the BEF were to retire to the Channel ports, it was unlikely that more than a small part of the force could be got away".³ If such was the gloomy prediction when it was expected that several "Channel ports" would be available, how much more dire was it to be when there was only one. The fate of the BEF soon became the most important single issue facing the Government as it contained not

¹*Evening Standard, Leader Column, 22nd May.*

²*Hansard, 13th May, Vol.360, Col.1502.*

³*Cab 65/7, WM(49)136, 23rd May.*

just the flower of the Army, but its leaves, stem and root as well. If the BEF was trapped in France, then Britain would be at her most defenceless at a time when the risk of invasion was at its greatest. Indeed, before the "miracle" of Dunkirk, it was not so much 'if' the army would be trapped, as when. General Ironside, who would be expected to have known, wrote in his diary on 23 May "I cannot see that we have much hope of getting any of the BEF out",¹ and a day later;

"The final debacle cannot be long delayed and it is difficult to see how we can help. It cannot mean the evacuation of more than a minute portion of the BEF and the abandonment of all the equipment of which we are so short in this country. Horrible days we have to live through".

They were indeed "horrible days", but he ends with a sentence which sums up both the utter despair and still persisting hope of the period. "We shall have lost practically all our trained soldiers by the next few days unless a miracle appears to help us".²

As the catastrophe in France approached, with confidence in ultimate victory a matter of "faith", and of immediate rescue for the BEF dependent on a "miracle",³ it was natural that those in authority

¹*Ironside Diary*, 23rd May, p.331.

²*Ironside Diary*, 25th May, p.332.

³*This almost religious view of the prospects for Britain is best reflected in a Times Leader article, "The Challenge", of 25th May. After recalling the days of Agincourt, the Armada, of Wellington and Haig, the article continued: "But, though in every crisis of their fate they [the British people] have laboured and endured to the utmost, they never placed their trust in their own strength alone. The nation is called tomorrow to seek the ultimate support, where our fathers sought it, from the right hand of God. We may approach the altar without misgivings, as we are without fear, for we know, with a certainty more absolute than any of our ancestors have felt since Alfred the Great confronted the hordes of the heathen, that our cause is just. We are contending for truth, for peace, and for mercy, for the protection of the weak against the arrogance and cruelty of pagan power. If, then, in singleness and simplicity of heart, we turn in the hour of danger to God, we can be sure of receiving the ancient response to prayer: "As I was with Moses, so*

should begin to look to a way out of the crisis. Having already mentioned the alternative of fighting on single-handed, it is now necessary to raise the other, tentatively suggested option. This was an attempt to negotiate out of an impossible corner. As early as 16 May, Neville Chamberlain in the talk with Kennedy referred to earlier,¹ said that "It seemed to me that if the French collapsed our only chance of escaping destruction would be if Roosevelt made an appeal for an armistice, though it did not seem likely that the Germans would respond". I will analyse later the reasons why Chamberlain did not pursue this line of reasoning once the French did collapse; it is only necessary now to demonstrate that this was not a brief moment of depression. Three days later, Chamberlain wrote "Our only hope, it seems to me, lies in Roosevelt and the U.S.A. But unfortunately they are so unready themselves that they cannot help us now while preaching at Hitler is not likely to be effective".²

It was not only the Leader of the Conservative Party, Chamberlain, who at some time or other saw mediation by a third party as the best way out for Britain. The Foreign Secretary "was definitely of the opinion that if anybody is able to save a debacle on the part of the Allies if it arrives at that point it is the President".³ This attitude was guessed at by Leo Amery, who, in a speech in Oxford, had "thought of saying something by way of warning against the Hitler peace offensive but had sent it round to Edward [Halifax] who toned it down to something so weak that it almost looked like an invitation to Hitler to offer terms of peace on which we might run out".⁴ Even allowing for some overstatement by Amery, it is clear that Halifax was

I will be with thee: I will not fail thee nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage".

¹Chamberlain Diary, 16th May. NC 2/24a.

²David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-1941*, London. 1981. p.103. Subsequently: Reynolds.

³Reynolds, page 103.

⁴Amery Diary, 22nd May. Amery was Secretary of State for India. I have not been able to trace the speech itself.

already having grave doubts about the feasibility and wisdom of single-mindedly pursuing the war.

It was the visit of the French Premier, Paul Reynaud, on 26 May, which precipitated the official discussion of the so far privately held doubts about the continuance of the war. The Cabinet debate of 26 to 28 May about the possibility of seeking to negotiate out of the disaster that had arisen was not therefore something that arose only on that day, and, as will be shown later, did not quickly vanish. It had an immediate genesis of about ten days, which was itself the result of over twenty years of thought about the utter futility and horrific destructiveness of modern war. Before discussing the debate that started on 26 May, its immediate context can be shown from the following two quotations: on 24 May, Chamberlain noted "The situation keeps one on tenterhooks. In a couple of days one will probably know which way the balance is going".¹ A day later Halifax wrote "The one firm rock on which everybody has been willing to build for the last two years was the French Army, and the Germans walked through it like they did through the Poles".²

¹*Chamberlain to Simon, 24th May, Simon Papers. Mss Simon 86.*

²*Halifax Diary, 25th May. A7.8.4.*

CHAPTER 7

BRITISH WAR AIMS AND THE DEFEAT IN FRANCE

When Lord Halifax wrote of the Germans walking through the French Army, "the one firm rock" of Allied policy,¹ he was merely expressing the common sense of bewilderment felt by many in London at events in France. It was indeed "the lowest point of our fortunes, when it was very doubtful whether more than a fraction of our army could be extricated from the Continent",² and it would be wrong to minimize the shock this caused. Although Oliver Harvey could write on 27 May "The situation is in no way worse, but much the same as in 1914",³ to those in London this was no longer the case. The memory of 1914, and of the spring of 1918, although doubtless helping morale to withstand the initial German advance in 1940, was a poor guide once it was clear history was not going to repeat itself. Of this, Michael Balfour writes "... many people found the bases of their outlook on the world being swept away from under them. Were we going to be unable to stop Hitler and the Nazis as everybody else had been? Was democratic freedom doomed? Were ruthlessness, cruelty and cynical obscurantism going to prevail?"⁴ He continues to describe Neville Chamberlain as "psychologically and politically bankrupt once his optimistic confidence was shown to be hollow",⁵ and this assessment contains deep truths about not only the former Prime Minister, but also about much of the establishment over which he had held sway. It was in such a situation of bankruptcy, strategical as well as psychological, that the crucial decisions about Britain's continuation of the war took place between 26 and 28 May.

The official history is correct in saying of the Chiefs of Staff

¹ *Halifax Diary*, 25th May. A7.8.4. All dates are 1940, unless otherwise shown.

² J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*. London: H.M.S.O., 1957.p.209. Subsequently; J.R.M. Butler.

³ *Harvey Diary*, 27th May. Add Mss 56326.

⁴ *Balfour*, p.185.

⁵ *Ibid.*

during this period that "there was never any thought of surrender or negotiation with the enemy",¹ but this statement does not go nearly far enough. Firstly it confuses the ideas of "surrender" and "negotiation with the enemy" by treating them as synonymous, when there was a huge gulf of meaning between the two. Secondly, they made clear what was essential for survival and thus showed what circumstances would make peace necessary. What the Chiefs of Staff did was to draw the line, which, once crossed, would reduce the possibilities "to surrender or negotiation with the enemy".

In its treatment of the subject of "The immediate consequences of the French Collapse", the official history plays down the need for discussions of the immediate future of British policy. Saying that "A review of our plans was clearly needed" - a somewhat misleading understatement of the depth of this review - it comments on the report "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality" in the following way:

"It would be wrong to regard this appreciation as expressing the matured views of the Chiefs of Staff at this time. The officers who prepared it emphasised later that the relevant paragraphs "were not designed to serve as a precise definition of our future strategy and were included primarily to illustrate our ability to continue the war and to argue the urgent measures it was considered desirable to institute"; and we are told that when the Chiefs of Staff came to consider the draft their attention was "mainly focussed on the recommendations for immediate action"."²

Whether these views were "matured" or not [indeed how could they be in such a fast-moving situation?] is really neither here nor there as far

¹*J.R.M. Butler, p.217.*

²*J.R.M. Butler, p.209.*

as the early summer of 1940 was concerned. What the Chiefs of Staff were doing was conducting a complete overhaul of British strategy in the face of an immediate threat, with the conclusions reached forming "the basis for subsequent appreciations in the next twelve months" and for Government thinking - and hoping - during the following three months.

On 19 May, Winston Churchill asked the Chiefs of Staff to investigate the means whereby we could continue to fight single-handed if French resistance were to collapse completely, involving the loss of a substantial proportion of the British Expeditionary Force".¹ By which something more than a "review of our plans" was called for. The Chiefs of Staff had to consider for the first time the question of whether Britain could "continue to fight". The fact that this question was asked shows the extent of the re-evaluation taking place: no longer was the debate about how the war was to be conducted, but concerned whether there was to be a war to conduct. This then was the issue raised by the defeat of France. The details of this paper will be dealt with in a following chapter, but for the moment it will be necessary just to give the essentials as the Chiefs of Staff saw them. Of the immediate future they wrote that "Germany might break down the resistance of the United Kingdom" by "unrestricted air attack aimed at breaking public morale, starvation of the country by attacks on shipping and ports, and occupation by invasion", and that;

"The vital fact is that our ability to avoid defeat will depend on three factors:-

(a) whether the morale of our people will withstand the strain of air bombardment;

(b) whether it will be possible to import the absolute essential minimum of commodities necessary to sustain

¹ Cab 66/7, WP(40)168, 25th May, "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality".

life and to keep our war industries in action;

(c) our capacity to resist invasion."

And added crucially that "All of these depend primarily on whether our fighter defences will be able to reduce the scale of attack to reasonable bounds". Their view of this all-important question was that "... it is impossible to say whether or not the United Kingdom could hold out in all circumstances". However they added "We think there are good grounds for belief that the British people will endure the greatest strain if they realise - as they are beginning to do - that the existence of the Empire is at stake". When turning to more long-term matters, the most important conclusion was that:

"Finally, we emphasise once more that these conclusions as to our ability to bring the war to a successful conclusion depend entirely upon Pan-American economic and financial co-operation".

The Chiefs of Staffs' conclusions, reinforced by the report "British Strategy in the Near Future"¹ of 26 May, dealt essentially with the question of whether Britain "could continue the fight single-handed", initially in the sense of whether immediate survival was possible and then whether Britain had the "ability to bring the war to a successful conclusion". What they did not consider, and were not asked to consider [and possibly would not have answered anyway] was whether Britain should "continue to fight single-handed". This was not a military, but a political question. The final concluding paragraph of "British Strategy in the Near Future" reads:

"To sum up, our conclusion is that prima facie Germany has most of the cards; but the real test is whether the morale

¹ *Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.*

of our fighting personnel and civil population will counter-balance the numerical and material advantages which Germany enjoys. We believe it will".¹

There is here no hint of the political questions that faced the British Government, and considering the words of their reference, which concerned "the prospects of our continuing the war alone ...", there is no reason why there should be. It is now necessary to turn away from the question of whether war could be pursued with any chance of success, and consider the debate about whether it should be. This second debate, which has received less attention than the former, is the chief concern of the present chapter because it raised the fundamental issue of the British Government's policy towards Germany, now that France had been defeated, in both its immediate and long-term aspects.

The impending calamity of the defeat of France raised the whole issue of Britain continuing to fight the war, but by the time France actually requested an armistice the issue had been settled for the short term. As P.M.H. Bell writes "... assuming such a defeat [of France], what courses were considered? The main choice was simple but awesome; to make peace or continue war".² It was not the choice between fighting and surrendering, as later faced France, but between fighting for a settlement in the future³ and negotiating one now. Churchill's statement to Roosevelt that "in no conceivable circumstances would we surrender"⁴ was true at that time, but as far as a negotiated settlement was concerned, it was also irrelevant. The real situation was the one described to the Dominions on 26 May: "We have to face the possibility that the French are not going to carry on. The question of our

¹ *Cab 66/7, WP (40) 169, 26th May.*

² *Bell, p. 31.*

³ *See following chapter.*

⁴ *Prem 3/468, pp.194-5, 20th May. Churchill to Roosevelt.*

position on this hypothesis is being considered" and, revealing the time-period of this consideration, it continued "... and I hope to be able to telegraph fully in the course of tomorrow the War Cabinet's preliminary views".¹ The British consideration of "the question of our position", and the alternatives to the policy of continued war, are the subjects of this chapter.

One possible way out of the crisis was suggested when Halifax, acting on the belief that the U.S.A. might have been able to assist the Allies, wrote the draft of a possible telegram to President Roosevelt to be sent in the event of the loss of the BEF and the surrender of the French. This contained the suggestion that Roosevelt should use American influence, with the possible threat of full U.S. support for Britain, to try and ameliorate any terms put forward by Hitler.² This projected attempt to gain terms which would not affect Britain's independence, particularly no surrender of the fleet and the R.A.F., was abortive, and very soon Halifax and those who thought like him began to look elsewhere.

The country which became the main focus concerning alternatives to 'total war' was Italy, the 'honest broker' of Munich. The reason for this was two-fold. Firstly, Italy's state of non-belligerency was seen to be changing to vulture-like hostility towards an increasingly defenceless France, and secondly, a hang-over from the days of Stresa, Mussolini was concerned with the threat of the growing power of Germany. The question of whether Italy was really powerful enough, diplomatically or especially in military potential, was not really considered; nor was her influence on German counsels fully assessed. For her to act as Halifax had wanted could seriously have jeopardised Italian relations with Germany. If Hitler really was insecure about

¹*That is, after Reynaud's visit.*

²*D. Reynolds, p.103.*

what to do next and if his people's support really was as sullen and fragile as some in Britain had thought before May, then Italian pressure may have tipped the balance, but in the euphoria of defeating the French the atmosphere was totally different and there seems little possibility that Italian co-operation with the Allies would have had much affect. Initially, the idea of any sort of arrangement between Italy and the Allies was deeply disliked, as Halifax wrote in his diary "I anticipate that if Hitler gets Paris we shall be immediately confronted with menacing peace terms, supported by the blackmailing Mussolini".¹ On 16 May Churchill had appealed to Mussolini not to go to war, and received an uncompromising reply.² It was, however, impossible to leave the matter there as the French needed the psychological boost of not having to face another enemy. Therefore an attempt was made to "Buy off Italy".³ One agent for this plan was Sir Robert Vansittart who, as Sir Alec Cadogan recorded, suggested "we should offer to discuss the Mediterranean with Italy". Cadogan's reaction, "I'm all for it - if it will stave off war with Italy for a few days",⁴ shows how limited the plan was. The following day, Halifax reported that Vansittart's line with the Italians had been: "We were now, as always, willing to enter into discussions with the Italian Government with a view to putting an end to the difficulties and misunderstandings which blocked the path of friendship between the two peoples". There was no hint of Italian mediation, merely of a direct agreement with Italy. However, the Foreign Secretary was sanguine about the outcome. "Very likely nothing might come of all this", he said, "nevertheless, even if the result were merely to gain time, it would be valuable. The French would be pleased ..."⁵ The

¹*Halifax Diary*, 19th May. A7.8.4.

²*Bell*, p.39.

³*Harvey Diary*, 25th May. Add Mss 56396.

⁴*Cadogan Diaries*, 24th May, p.289.

⁵*Cab 65/7*, WM(40)138, 25th May. Churchill expressed "no objection to this move".

motivation for this initial contact with Italy was, therefore, to buy off Mussolini in order to concentrate on defending France against Germany. As such it should be linked with Vansittart's attempts at Anglo-Italian understanding earlier in the 1930's,¹ rather than to the way the Foreign Secretary developed it in the following days. This development, from the idea of approaching Italy so that the Allies could better resist Germany, to one of virtually bribing her to exert influence on Germany in a general peace-conference, was carried out by Halifax. It occurred during a talk with the Italian Ambassador to London, Signor Bastianini, on 25 May, and reflected a new possibility for Britain's relations with Germany.

Before the expansion of the possible approach to Italy, another avenue allowing the Allies to concentrate on defending France was pursued. This was "that Roosevelt be asked to inform Musso that the Allies would be willing to consider his problems provided he kept out of the war and to ask what he claims" wrote Oliver Harvey, who commented, "I like this idea better than that of our going direct to Musso. FO agrees to this and we are approaching Roosevelt accordingly".² This idea had been communicated to the Foreign Office via the British Embassy in Paris two days earlier.³ Halifax added the phrase "that the Allies were ready to consider reasonable Italian claims at the end of the war, and would welcome Italy at a Peace Conference on equal terms with the belligerents ...",⁴ and communicated it to Roosevelt and by him to Mussolini - who flatly rejected the idea on 27 May.⁵ Again the main motive behind this attempt to keep Italy out of the war was to

¹*e.g.* Stresa.

²*Harvey Diary*, 25th May. Add Mss 56396.

³*Harvey*, see note 2 above, says this was "*Daladier's Plan*".
For message see Note 4 below.

⁴Cab 65/7, WM(40)137. Quoted from *Teleg.* No.262, DIPP, 28th May.

⁵*Bell*, p.39. Oliver Harvey summed this up as "a stage further" in "our move to buy off Italy", and was realistic about the outcome: "Muss of course, if he plays at all, will put forward monstrous demands for a new Treaty of London". *Harvey Diary*, 26th May.
Add Mss 56396.

cement the Anglo-French alliance and keep it fighting against Germany, by delaying Mussolini's move if not forestalling it. Yet the fact that it was a French plan agreed to by the British shows how great was the need felt in London to guard against French recrimination. No matter how slight the chances of success, approaches had to be made for the sake of the Alliance. On 25 May, the French Comité de Guerre decided that the next day Reynaud should ask what sacrifices Britain was prepared to make towards buying off Italy, and, that once this was known, a further direct Allied approach to Mussolini ought to be made.¹

During 25 May there were, therefore, several plans for either direct or indirect attempts to prevent Italy from declaring war, and it was to discuss these that the Foreign Secretary talked with the Italian Ambassador to London. By the end of this talk the idea of Italy mediating between the Allies and Germany took firm root in Halifax's mind and in so doing raised all the wide-ranging questions about Britain's war policy.

Halifax's momentous conversation with Ambassador Bastianini began along the lines developed during the previous day, that Britain "had always been quite willing to discuss any question between the two countries and to endeavour to reach solutions satisfying to both sides",² and had only refrained from doing so because of the "discouraging nature of Mussolini's reply to Churchill's message of 16 May. Yet this limited objective, designed to further the war against Germany, was transformed when Bastianini observed that:

"It had, however, always been Signor Mussolini's view that the settlement of problems between Italy and any other country should be part of a general European settlement,

¹*Bell*, p.39.

²*Cab 65/13, WM (40) 140, 26th May. Halifax's telegram to Sir Percy Loraine (No. 413)*

and his Excellency asked me whether he might inform his Government that His Majesty's Government considered it opportune now to examine the question at issue between our two countries within the larger framework of a European settlement".

Halifax replied that "if any discussions were held" on wider European questions, Italy would certainly be included, but "that it was difficult to visualise such wide discussions while the war was still proceeding". Bastianini, undeterred by this side-stepping of the issue, replied that "once such a discussion were begun, war would be pointless". The exchange of views which followed this is worth quoting in full as it establishes the position Halifax was to try to press on the Cabinet for the next few days:

"Signor Mussolini, said the Ambassador, was interested in European questions - the Ambassador mentioned Poland - and was always concerned to build a European settlement, that would not merely be an armistice, but would protect European peace for a century. I said that the purpose of His Majesty's Government was the same, and they would never be unwilling to consider any proposal made with authority that gave promise of the establishment of a secure and peaceful Europe. I added that I thought I could say that this would also be the attitude of the French Government".

Having thus admitted that Britain "would never be unwilling" to discuss the idea of peace, the Foreign Secretary went further and said that Bastianini could inform Mussolini of this fact, because;

"... plainly the secure peace in Europe that both Signor Mussolini and we desired to see established could only come

by the finding through frank discussions of solutions that were generally acceptable and by the joint determination of the Great Powers to maintain them".

Before analysing the reactions of Halifax's colleagues to the idea of "proposals ... that gave promise of the establishment of a secure and peaceful Europe", it is necessary first to examine the importance of his statements in relation to British Government policy towards Germany. The Foreign Secretary said that the aim of Britain - and now also of France - was a secure peace,¹ which was in some respects a reiteration of the consistent line of the 'phoney war'. Another sidelight on both earlier policy and Halifax's present thinking can be found in the phrase that His Majesty's Government "would never be unwilling to consider any proposal" that promised a secure peace. His attitude was thus claimed not to be merely a desperate response to the existing crisis, but a constant of Government thinking, past and future, given more urgency by the impending French defeat. Halifax, far from advocating total defeat of Germany instead of a negotiated settlement, was advocating the exact reverse. Negotiation rather than bellicosity was the only way forward. As he said "... the secure peace in Europe ... could only come by the finding through frank discussion of solutions that were generally acceptable and by the joint determination of the Great Powers to maintain them". It was, to Halifax, not so much a choice between war and a conference, but a conference now, before France collapsed, or a conference some time later. This should not be interpreted as a desire to surrender and the issue of the "joint determination of the Great Powers" [of course including Germany] to maintain peace was a very major one. Also, as subsequent discussions showed, it was more the

¹*The differences between this and the guaranteed peace sought earlier are important and will be examined later.*

concern over the lack of security after the peace than the idea of negotiating a peace, which formed the main subject of debate.

The following day Halifax reported his talk with Bastianini to the War Cabinet.¹ He began by observing that "we had to face the fact that it was not so much a question of imposing complete defeat upon Germany but of safeguarding the independence of our own Empire and if possible that of France". It is significant of the narrowing of British war aims during this period that there was no recorded objection to this statement. The Government, Churchill included, was fighting for Britain's independence, and possibly that of France, but nothing else. The Foreign Secretary, after saying that "Signor Bastianini had clearly made soundings as to the prospect of our agreeing to a conference", reported that he had said "that peace and security in Europe were ... our main object, and we should actually be prepared to consider any proposals which might lead to this, provided our liberty and independence were assured". This assertion did not go unchallenged by the Prime Minister, who said "that peace and security might be achieved under a German domination of Europe. That we could never accept". The reason for this was that "We must ensure our complete liberty and independence", which would be compromised fatally if the continent of Europe was under German control. It was, then, "any negotiations which might lead to a derogation of our rights and power" that Churchill "was opposed to", and not the idea of a negotiated settlement itself. This was a fundamental change of Britain's war objectives. The crucial question was the terms that would be offered.² Chamberlain's response was that France might be pressured to "agree to a conference" under threat of Italian intervention "on Germany's side", which would not augur well for the future, while Attlee "thought that

¹*Cab 65/13, WM(40)139, 26th May.*

²*This will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter.*

Mussolini would be very nervous of Germany emerging as the predominant power in Europe", which would facilitate attempts at a settlement. Four of the five War Cabinet members were thus not opposed to the idea of a negotiated settlement which would secure peace that granted Britain "complete liberty and independence". Halifax had said that Bastianini "had asked for a further interview that morning" during which "he might have fresh proposals to put forward", but Attlee suggested that "We must now await the arrival of M. Reynaud and the report of the Chiefs of Staff as to our prospects of holding out if the French collapsed". This then was the position on the morning of the French Premier's visit. The idea of buying off Italy alone was also raised at this meeting, but solely with the idea to "keep matters going" with France. The most pressing point was to investigate the necessity, desirability and prospects of Italian mediation.

The situation for the Allies was indeed bleak when the French Premier Reynaud visited London on 26 May. On the morning of this visit, Churchill warned the Cabinet that "we might have to face a situation in which the French were going to collapse, and that we must do our best to extricate the British Expeditionary Force from Northern France.¹ Therefore, he continued, they should "be prepared for M. Reynaud in his interview that day to say that the French could not carry on the fight". In such a situation the fate of the BEF was of supreme importance, and despite pessimism about the results, no attempt should be spared to save it. Indeed later that day "The Prime Minister said that he thought the only point to be settled that day was to persuade M. Reynaud that General Weygand should be instructed to issue orders for the BEF to march to the coast".²

The fate of the BEF was not, however, uppermost in the mind of the

¹Cab 65/13, WM(40)139, 26th May.

²Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May. *With the British concern being to prevent disagreement over this contentious issue from damaging the French will to fight.*

French Premier. A day earlier the French Comité de Guerre had formally discussed the possibility of defeat and a separate peace. As Cadogan put it, although "R [Reynaud] doesn't say that France will capitulate ... all his conversation goes to show that he sees no alternative".¹ Reynaud was expected, by his colleagues in Paris and by their counterparts in London, to ask that France be released from her 28 March agreement not to seek a separate peace. However, instead of saying this directly, he got caught up "in a grand negotiation on the Munich model, which would have salvaged the alliance while simultaneously costing it the war".²

In his memoirs, Reynaud wrote that his visit to London on 26 May was "an attempt to obtain from Churchill, on the promptings of our Ambassador in Rome, certain concessions in order to prevent Italy falling on us".³ It is important here to note the limited nature of Reynaud's aim: it was to reach a specific agreement with Italy, rather than a general European settlement. This minimal nature of the French Premier's initial aims, as compared to what was later discussed, is also shown by Chamberlain's diary entry for that day. "Reynaud wished to make an appeal to Mussolini. He would offer Jibuti, arrangements in Tunis, etc., if he would refrain from entering the war. This would release 10 divisions".⁴ P.M.H. Bell describes this "approach to prevent Italy from entering the war" as the "only idea Reynaud offered".⁵

The Cabinet record of Churchill's initial interview with Reynaud⁶ is the clearest exposition of the Frenchman's thoughts at this stage. Starting from the question "Where then, could France look for salvation?",

¹Bell, p.34.

²Eleanor Gates, *End of the Affair*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1981. p.385.

³Paul Reynaud, *In the Thick of the Fight*. Translated by James D. Lambert. London. 1955. pp.404-6.
Subsequently: Reynaud.

⁴Chamberlain Diary, 26th May. NC 2/24a.

⁵Bell, p.34.

⁶Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.

Reynaud suggested "a further approach" to Mussolini should be made which "would release 10 divisions". The "sort of terms" that it was expected would be asked included "Probably the neutralisation of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, the demilitarization of Malta, and the limitation of naval forces in the Mediterranean. Some alteration of the status of Tunis would be asked for ..." With the objective being "that the offer of such terms might keep Italy out of the war". Had this been the only plan under discussion that day, Reynaud's visit to London would probably be remembered for the decision taken about the fate of the BEF. As it was, however, there was another plan discussed at the same time; the idea of attempting to obtain Italian mediation in the wider conflict. Although both these projected endeavours involved Italy they should not be confused as they aimed, as already stated, at diametrically opposed objectives. To prevent Italy from entering the war encouraged France to continue her war against Germany. To obtain Italian mediation in a general European settlement would have ended this war.

The suggestion of seeking Mussolini's mediation, as at Munich, although taken up during the 26th by Reynaud, originated not with him but with Halifax.¹ Reynaud's memoirs show this clearly, as before there is any record of mentioning this himself Reynaud writes;

"Lord Halifax told me that he had already initiated advances on the previous day toward the Italian Ambassador in London, Count Bastianini, indicating to him that the Allies would be ready to consider any proposal for negotiation both as regards Italian interests as well as the bases of a just and lasting peace".²

The French Premier's ideas were based on a narrowly based perception of

¹*In the interview with Bastianini the previous day.*

²*Reynaud, pp.404-6.*

Italian interests, concerning territory and geography, while Halifax expanded this by resurrecting old Italian balance of power concerns towards a novel end; with the proposals of each man corresponding in importance to the respective interests they were trying to exploit. The Foreign Secretary put forward his idea in Cabinet immediately after Churchill had described his initial talk with Reynaud.¹ Saying that he favoured the course of approaching Italy, Halifax introduced two additional concepts to those outlined by Reynaud. Firstly, by commenting that he "thought that the last thing Signor Mussolini wanted was to see Hitler dominating Europe", he raised the possibility of exploiting Italy's perception of the balance of power, and secondly, he linked the idea of an Allied approach to Mussolini with an attempt by the latter to influence Hitler. "He [Mussolini] would be anxious, if he could, to persuade Herr Hitler to take a more reasonable attitude", was Halifax's view. There were therefore two plans under discussion, two sets of proposals to achieve different ends, and it is important for the correct understanding of the discussions occasioned by Reynaud's visit that adequate distinction is made.²

One of the reasons for the confusion of the two projected approaches to Italy was a Memorandum produced by Halifax on 26 May,³ "Which shows briefly what has passed between His Majesty's Government and the French Government on the subject of the possibility of securing mediation in some form by the Italian Government". This paper contained a summary of the possible approaches to Italy and was presented as a record of Reynaud's views.⁴ These, Halifax wrote, were firstly that the

¹ Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.

² Bell does not always do this, possibly putting too much emphasis on the one as the 'logical' outcome of the other when in fact they had clearly different roots. See p.38.

³ Cab 66/7, WP(40)170, 26th May. Drafted probably between the meeting of Reynaud with Ministers and the Meeting of the five War Cabinet Ministers on the afternoon of 26th May. See Cab 66/13 WM(40)140, p.6.

⁴ Ibid; Also "He enquired whether His Majesty's Government would join with the French Government in making a direct approach to Signor Mussolini on the following lines". Paragraph 3. See Bell, p.40.

Allies should give a "frank explanation" to Mussolini of the results of a German victory. Secondly, that "Great Britain and France will fight to the end for the preservation of their independence: . and they will be helped by the resources of other nations now outside the war". Thirdly, "If Signor Mussolini will co-operate with us in securing a settlement of all European questions which safeguard the independence and security of the Allies, and could be the basis of a just and durable peace for Europe, we will undertake at once to discuss, with the desire to find solutions, the matters in which Signor Mussolini is primarily interested". And lastly, requesting Mussolini to "state in secrecy" exactly which "Mediterranean questions" he would like solved, whereupon "France and Great Britain will at once do their best to meet his wishes ...". Analysis of these points, however, reveals that it is unlikely that they represented Reynaud's views alone. The first and fourth points, of the balance of power and of "Mediterranean questions", are indeed consistent with all that Reynaud had been saying that day. The same cannot be said of the other two. The reference to the French "fighting to the end for the preservation of their independence" and to "other nations" - i.e. the U.S.A. - helping them, is totally foreign to the thinking of Reynaud and his Cabinet at this time.¹ The most important point, however, is the third, suggesting as it does that Mussolini would be invited to "co-operate with us in securing a settlement of all European questions ...". This paragraph, particularly the reference to the "independence and security of the Allies" and to "a just and durable peace for Europe" as well as that quoted, is much more reminiscent of the words of Halifax than of Reynaud. Before the meeting with the British Foreign Secretary, Reynaud had not expressed this idea, at least not in London. There is, however, an uncanny resemblance to

¹The French Comité de Guerre had discussed a possible armistice a day earlier.

the matters raised in Halifax's talk with Bastianini of the previous day.¹ It therefore seems that if these were Reynaud's suggestions, at least two of them were suggestions he was re-transmitting and which originally came from the Foreign Secretary. Thus it was much more a record of what had "passed between" Reynaud and Halifax than of suggestions by the former to the latter, as it was presented. Further evidence for such a deduction can be gleaned from Chamberlain's record of the discussions which took place between Reynaud, Churchill, Attlee, Halifax and himself at the Admiralty on the afternoon of 26 May.² After discussing the order to Gort, they returned to the subject of Italy, pointing out that the mere release of ten divisions if Italy continued her non-belligerency "would make no real difference to the military position".³ Chamberlain continued to write that Reynaud "said Mussolini might found on the enquiry a proposal for a European settlement" to which Halifax replied that if they suggested that Mussolini's own independence was at stake and offered at the same time to try to meet any demands that he might make there was "a prospect of a just and durable settlement of Europe". This co-operation in argument, even with the use of the phrase "just and durable",⁴ suggests that in the matter of Italian mediation, Halifax and Reynaud were in complete agreement and it is surely possible that Halifax was attempting to give extra power to his argument by linking it to Reynaud.

While there was agreement and perhaps collusion on the matter of possible Italian mediation between the French Premier and the British

¹Cab 65/13, WM (40) 140. FO Telegram No. 413 to Rome, 25th May.

And Cab 65/13. 26th May, WM(40)139, Minute 1, ps.3-4.

²There are no minutes of this meeting.

³Chamberlain Diary, 26th May. NC 2/24a.

⁴Reynaud's memoirs contain the following passage: "Lord Halifax told me that he had already initiated advances on the previous day toward the Italian Ambassador in London, Count Bastianini, indicating to him that the Allies would be ready to consider any proposal for negotiation both as regards Italian interests as well as the bases of a just and lasting peace". Again, the phrase is attributed to Halifax, not Reynaud. p.404-6.

Foreign Secretary, this does not necessarily mean that they expected it to succeed. Towards the end of his memorandum on suggested approaches to Mussolini,¹ Halifax wrote that "Reynaud was not given any definite reply" but that there was "only a very slender chance of success". However, in the Foreign Secretary's mind there was a chance, no matter how slender, and one which "would seem to depend principally on the degree of discomfort which the prospect of a Europe dominated by Hitler may cause to Mussolini". Churchill, too, "doubted whether anything would come of an approach to Italy" but "the matter was one which the War Cabinet would have to consider".² This consideration, which will be analysed next, was in fact an examination of the entire nature of the development of British policy towards Germany, and the very centre of the discussions about British reaction to the defeat of France.

In analysing the discussion of the suggested approaches to Mussolini, a distinction needs to be made between the reply to be given to the direct deal with Italy - point four on Halifax's above memorandum - and the more far-reaching debate on point three - the general settlement. As regards the specific offer to Italy, Reynaud was not able to secure an answer while he was in London. His memoirs record that "It was agreed that the British Cabinet would discuss the matter and that I should be kept informed",³ although, he writes, "... I saw that Churchill, whose leonine courage once more won my admiration, was in principle hostile to any concessions to Mussolini". Reynaud was indeed right about Churchill's hostility to the proposal,⁴ but, according to Chamberlain "WC said we would try and find some formula on which Musso would be approached but we must have time to think. With

¹ Cab 66/7, WP(40)170, 26th May.

² Cab 65/13. WM(40)140, 26th May.

³ Reynaud, pp.404-6.

⁴ See Cadogan Diaries, 26th May, p.290, of Churchill, "He against final appeal, which Reynaud wanted, to Miss." and Halifax Diary, 26th May, "Winston very doubtful about this". A7.8.4.

this R [Reynaud] had to be content ..."¹ Despite his hostility, "he did not raise objection to some approach being made to Signor Mussolini".² Although Reynaud felt Chamberlain had "some reservations"³ about rejecting the idea of approaching Italy, the latter's own diary is clear on this point; "My own opinion is that R's proposal would be of no avail". This is one of the first indications of the pragmatic view of the subject of negotiation of any sort during this period, a view which took on greater significance in the following days. The reason given why such an overture to Mussolini was unlikely to work was that "We hear Hitler has told M [Mussolini] that he does not want him in as he can manage France by himself. If so he evidently can't be bought off".⁴ The Cabinet minutes show that there were other considerations in Chamberlain's mind as well, particularly that the French would only gain the use of "the ten divisions now on the Italian front", and, had the Allies specified "certain named places" over which they were prepared to deal, the result would be that "Signor Mussolini would get something for nothing ..."⁵ Such a hypotheses was plainly unacceptable, and even the Foreign Secretary agreed on this, noting "I do not myself think it will do any good ..."⁶ Reynaud had wanted "some precise details"⁷ given to Mussolini, such as Tunisia, Gibraltar, Malta and Suez, but Halifax had persuaded him "to drop this suggestion", in accordance with the views of the other Cabinet Ministers, who feared an escalation of demands. While Chamberlain was concerned that Mussolini might respond to an Allied offer by saying "that he knew what he wanted, but was only prepared to deal as part of a general settlement", Halifax was at least as concerned about the French as the Italian reaction. His diary entry shows that "I do not want to give

¹ *Chamberlain Diary*, 26th May. NC2/24a.

² *Cab 65/13, WM(40)140*, 26th May.

³ *Reynaud*, pp.404-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Cab 65/13, WM(40)140*, 26th May.

⁶ *Halifax Diary*, 26th May. A7.8.4.

⁷ *Cab 65/13, WM(40)140*, 26th May.

the French an excuse for complaining", which was another feature to complicate the ensuing discussions.

On the 27 May, the War Cabinet, with the inclusion of the Secretary of State for Air, Sinclair, as leader of the Liberal Party, returned to the discussions. Before this, however, the French Ambassador saw Halifax "about the approach desired by Reynaud. He evidently did not believe in it much himself, and I told him that we did not".¹ The aim of Corbin's contact was firstly to give "geographical precision" to a British reply, and also to say "that he would not like it to be thought that, if certain action had been taken, France might have been able to continue the struggle". In Halifax's words "It rather looked as though the French were preparing to put the blame on us".²

The Cabinet discussions were opened by Churchill saying that the approach Reynaud wanted to make "was not unlike the approach which we had asked President Roosevelt to make to Signor Mussolini"; however, the great difference was that this was clearly on the Allies' initiative. After Halifax followed this with comment on his interview with Corbin, Chamberlain then embarked on a long analysis of the elements to be considered. He repeated that "Herr Hitler did not want them [i.e. Italy] to come into the war", so any concessions would be pointless. Any overture "would meet with a rebuff" if it dealt with "Italian questions" only, but would be more favourably received if it concerned a General Conference; however, Chamberlain "did not think he [Mussolini] would play any part in the game until Paris had been taken". In all, "the proposed French approach to Signor Mussolini would serve no useful purpose". The only factor to alter the logical conclusion of Chamberlain's arguments being "the attitude of the French". As Churchill summed up, Chamberlain's "argument amounted to this, that nothing would come of the approach,

¹*Halifax Diary, 27th May. A7.8.4.*

²*Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.*

but that it was worth doing to sweeten relations with a failing ally".

Sinclair, "convinced of the futility of an approach to Italy at this time", was greatly concerned that "the suggestion that we were prepared to barter away pieces of British territory would have a deplorable effect and would make it difficult for us to continue the desperate struggle which faced us". This crucial question of morale will be discussed later as it loomed large in the debates on the wider issue of Italian mediation. Sinclair's view was that the "best course" was the approach through President Roosevelt, and if "the French were so weak" that they could not wait for the result of Reynaud's appeal, "was it wise to go further with them and weaken our own position?" Halifax responded to this by saying that the French proposal, although unacceptable in its "geographical precision", was not too unreasonable, and that "since Signor Mussolini would know that President Roosevelt's approach had been prompted by us" there was little danger in it either. Attlee and Greenwood thought that any approach would be pointless and not only "very damaging to us", but in Greenwood's words, "It would be heading for disaster to go any further with these approaches".

The concluding sections of this discussion saw Churchill "increasingly oppressed with the futility of the suggested approach to Signor Mussolini",¹ and determined to take a firm stand, thus avoiding ruining "the integrity of our fighting position in this country". Britain "had gone a long way already" in her approach to Italy he said, and not only would a further overture prove "futile", but would involve "us in a deadly danger". Again after this unanimity of opinion, backed by relatively few differences of argument, Chamberlain intervened to

¹The British Ambassador in Rome agreed with this. Of these approaches he wrote "Their success presupposes a degree of reasonableness and moderation on the part of Mussolini which in my opinion he does not possess". Sir Percy Lorraine to Halifax, dated 27th & 28th May. FO 1011/67.

moderate the tone of the reply to be given. He proposed that Britain "ought to go a little further with it, in order to keep the French in good temper". This could be done by not sending "a complete refusal", but by temporizing, using the uncertain outcome of Roosevelt's approach¹ as "a good argument" for delay. The Cabinet agreed that "a reasoned reply on these lines was the best course to take". The discussion boiled down to three main considerations: firstly, whether an approach to Mussolini, of whatever territorial exactitude, was of itself unacceptable; secondly, if not intrinsically wrong, would it achieve the desired effect? and thirdly, what account ought to be taken of French wishes? On the first issue there was felt to be nothing inherently wrong in trying to buy-off Italy. On the second, there was complete agreement that such an approach would only have a negative effect, and on the third, Britain "did not wish to go far in this direction, but they did prefer to avoid presenting a blank refusal to the French people".

The reply to Reynaud was decided upon on 23 May, but again, before Cabinet met there was an attempt by the French Premier to influence opinion. Chamberlain was obviously unimpressed with this, describing the French approach as "derisory in itself and inopportune",² while Oliver Harvey's observation that "PR [Reynaud] however is desperately anxious and so is Daladier to buy off Italy, even though Roosevelt's demarche has met with no response and Halifax's broad hint to Bastianini has also been unsuccessful"³ gives some idea of the background to Reynaud's actions.

The Cabinet discussion of the text of the reply to Reynaud was led by Chamberlain, and involved much repetition of matters previously raised, such as the argument over whether Hitler wanted Italy in the war,

¹*This approach was made by the US on 26th May and answered - negatively - later on 27th May.*

²*Chamberlain Diary, 28th May. NC 2/24a.*

³*Harvey Diary, 28th May. Add Mss 56396.*

whether Mussolini wanted to fight, and agreement that the approach would be no good anyway. There were, however, certain points of interest. Chamberlain declared that the rebuttal of Roosevelt's attempt to intervene did not mean that a similar fate awaited a move by the French, and that another aspect of the futility of the idea was that whatever was agreed with Italy, Germany would still be at war.¹ As Churchill wrote, it would not "have the slightest influence upon the realities of the case".² Chamberlain also raised the crucial question of the timing of an approach to Mussolini. He wanted to say that "without prejudice to the future, the present was not the time at which advances should be made to Signor Mussolini". This was not merely a gentle way of letting the French down, as he later said, "it was no good making an approach on the lines proposed by M. Reynaud at the present time".

On receipt of the draft reply by Chamberlain and Halifax, Churchill "expressed himself satisfied with the terms of the draft", which was accordingly despatched.

This reply, agreed by all the War Cabinet, represents an important document in the development of British Government attitudes towards a negotiated settlement, as it outlined the most ground they were prepared to give to the arguments of Reynaud. After briefly outlining "the terrible situation" with which the Allies were faced at that moment due to the capitulation of Belgium and the "very problematical" situation around the Channel ports, which could only make any German terms more unacceptable, the main points stated that: first, a specific offer to Mussolini, which "once made could not be subsequently withdrawn" would be unsuccessful. Second, that because "Hitler is flushed with victory and certainly counts on an early and complete collapse of Allied resistance,

¹*Cab 65/13, WM(40)145, 28th May.*

²*Prem 3/174/4, ps.11-13. Unsigned and undated note by Churchill on Prime Minister's note paper.*

it would be impossible for Signor Mussolini to put forward proposals for a conference with any success". Third, that "without excluding the possibility of an approach to Signor Mussolini at some time, we cannot feel that this would be the right moment", the possible affect on Allied morale being "extremely dangerous". The fourth and fifth points relate to the question of "how is the situation to be improved" and look to being able to "strengthen our hands in negotiation" in the future, continuing, in a sentence to be examined later, "It would indeed be a tragedy if by too hasty an acceptance of defeat we throw away a chance that was almost within our grasp of securing an honourable issue from the struggle",¹ and ending "In my view if we both stand out we may yet save ourselves from the fate of Denmark or Poland. Our successes must depend first on our unity, then on our courage and endurance".

David Reynolds sums up this reply as saying "that this did not seem an opportune time to approach Mussolini",² which, as the rejection following the purely French overture to Mussolini showed, was accurate. The time was indeed inopportune, because any approach "would be useless" as Harvey noted.³ The idea of buying off Mussolini was thus rejected as offering "no escape from our misfortunes".⁴ Not because it was in any way intrinsically wrong, but because it would be totally ineffective. For the sake of convenience, the discussions about a direct deal with Italy and those concerning her mediation in the larger conflict have been separated, and it is now necessary to look at this latter issue and discover whether it was also rejected for similar reasons. Before this, however, two sentences from Sir Percy Lorraine, British Ambassador to Rome, may serve as a post-script to the above discussion. He wrote:

"Historians, if the war aims, the political and the moral

¹Message of 28th May to Sir R. Campbell (Paris), No.255 Dipp., Gilbert, p.422.

²Reynolds, p.104.

³Harvey Diary, 29th May. Add Mss 56396.

⁴Prem 3/174/4, pp.11-13.

principles of the allies are secured by victory, may approve the generous gesture. But as a step in the conduct of the war I feel it is a mistake".¹

To date historians have agreed with his comment on "the conduct of the war", but have not approved of the "generous gesture". The present writer endorses this verdict.

Towards the end of the discussions about the advisability of a direct attempt to prevent Italy entering the war, Chamberlain said that "The only object likely to be achieved by offering these concessions was to induce Signor Mussolini to adopt the position of a mediator".² Indeed these two matters, of an approach to buy off Italy and one to induce Mussolini to mediate with Hitler, were closely linked despite their separate motives and ramifications. Because of this, the Cabinet discussions of both matters were often intertwined, so that it is not always clear from the minutes which proposal is being referred to. Yet to distinguish between them is crucial. Buying off Italy facilitated the war against Germany, Italian mediation meant its end: such was the enormity of the discussions of 26 to 28 May.

Eleanor Gates has written of this period "The hesitations of Halifax and a few others notwithstanding, they [the British Government] were determined to pursue the struggle, no matter the costs".³ This statement is potentially misleading in two ways. Firstly, it implied that there was no real doubt about either the short-term continuation of the fighting or about the ultimate aim to achieve victory by this struggle "no matter the costs". Such implications could not be further from the truth. There was real doubt about the continuation of fighting, or else the Italian mediation plan would not have been discussed at such

¹FO 1011/67, 27th & 28th May. Lorraine to Halifax.

²Cab 65/13, WM(40)145, 28th May.

³Eleanor Gates, *End of the Affair*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1981. p.378.

length and with such passion, and the Chiefs of Staff would not have been asked whether the war could be continued. There was also no Cabinet resolution to fight until victory was achieved. The Government determined to "pursue the struggle" because it saw no real alternative, but the long-term aim was left in the air, and the study of Churchill's public speeches is not a useful guide to this. Despite the rhetoric, despite the propaganda, the accession of Churchill and the collapse of France did not lead to the automatic adoption of a bellicose policy based on the military defeat of Germany. What policy these events did lead to is the subject of the remainder of this chapter and the chapter following. The second misleading aspect of Eleanor Gates' statement is that while it was true that Halifax hesitated in embarking on the wholesale slaughter continuing the war would entail, that he "was what you call [of] a peaceful and even religious disposition",¹ this does not fully explain his persistent advocacy of an attempt at mediation. His argument was based on an entirely different view of the prospects and results of a mediation attempt from that of most of his Cabinet colleagues. R.A. Butler later recalled that although "if he [Halifax] could have seen the opportunities of a peace he would certainly have plumped for it", however, "at that stage he realised it really wasn't in being".² This was not the case, for, as the Cabinet minutes show, it was precisely the fact that Halifax did see "opportunities for peace" which motivated his arguments.

During the discussions between Reynaud and four³ members of the War Cabinet at the Admiralty on 26 May, "Halifax argued that there could be no harm in trying Musso and seeing what the result was. If the terms were impossible we could still reject them".⁴ After Reynaud left the Foreign Secretary expanded this, arguing that "he attached rather

¹R.A. Butler. *Transcripts of interview for "World at War". Imperial War Museum*

²*Ibid.*

³*Greenwood arrived after Reynaud left.*

⁴*Chamberlain Diary, 26th May. NC2/24a.*

more importance than the Prime Minister to the desirability of allowing France to try out the possibilities of a European equilibrium".¹ The reasons for this, he continued, were that firstly, unlike Churchill, he did not think "that it was in Herr Hitler's interest to insist on outrageous terms", because of Germany's "internal weaknesses",² and secondly, because of the Italian conception of the balance of power. Halifax felt that Mussolini must be "alarmed" at Hitler's power and if he "was prepared to look at matters from the point of view of the balance of power, then we might consider Italian claims". Such a policy "might ... save France from the wreck" and "at any rate, he could see no harm in trying this line of approach". The Foreign Secretary said that he would "not look at ... for a moment" any "suggestion of terms which affected our independence", but that was not what he was talking about. What he wanted was to attempt to restore the "European equilibrium" and as this gave some hope of success and contained "no harm", Britain ought to pursue it. In fact:

"... if we got to the point of discussing the terms of a general settlement and found that we could obtain terms which did not postulate the destruction of our independence, we should be foolish if we did not accept them".

These were strong words for the normally mildly mannered and spoken Halifax, and they show both the depth of his feeling and the danger of the policy which he could see Churchill was determined to pursue.

The Cabinet discussions resumed the next day with the Foreign Secretary again raising similar arguments in an attempt to get the Cabinet to consider favourably Italian mediation. After a long discussion on the reply to be given to Reynaud about his direct approach to Italy,

¹*Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.*

²*It is interesting how persistent this belief was.*

the debate ranged onto the wider question when Churchill commented that "If the worst came to the worst, it would not be a bad thing for this country to go down fighting for the other countries which had been overcome by the Nazi tyranny".¹ There was no way that the Foreign Secretary could accept that Britain's pointless sacrifice could be anything other than a total disaster. It would mean the loss of all that she stood for and all that she had fought for, so Halifax raised again the "rather profound difference of points of view" between himself and the Prime Minister. This was Halifax's last real attempt to divert Britain from "Total War" and from a fight to the finish - very likely the finish of Britain.

After briefly supporting the French against Churchill's argument that they were trying to drag Britain "down the slippery slope" to peace, Halifax objected that:

"... he could not recognize any resemblance between the action which he proposed, and the suggestion that we were suing for terms and following a line which would lead us to disaster".

The way to disaster, he felt, was via the policy Churchill was advocating rather than his own, and because of this the Foreign Secretary tried to clarify under precisely what terms Britain would negotiate a settlement. The previous day, Halifax continued, the Prime Minister had been asked "whether, if he was satisfied that matters vital to the independence of this country were unaffected, he would be prepared to discuss terms". To which, according to Halifax, the Prime Minister had replied that:

"... he would be thankful to get out of our present

¹Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May. Bell sees this differently when he states, p.43, "but Halifax again launched the discussion into deeper waters" rather than it being Churchill's 'Kamikaze' attitude which sparked further discussion.

difficulties on such terms, provided we retained the essentials and the elements of our vital strength, even at the cost of some territory".

This much Halifax was fully in accord with; what he objected to was that Churchill now "seemed to suggest that under no condition would we contemplate any course except fighting to a finish". This was indeed the central question, but because this is what occurred does not mean that this was the only possibility open. It is a grave, though common, error to date the adoption of no "course except fighting to a finish" to the late spring of 1940. Despite the fact that "the issue was probably academic" because no acceptable terms would be offered, Halifax could not "accept the view now put forward by the Prime Minister". What the Foreign Secretary wanted was to find out whether Britain's "independence was at stake". If it was then he was prepared to take the risk of Britain being destroyed by continued fighting, but "if it was not at stake he would think it right to accept an offer which would save the country from avoidable disaster". The question turned on whether or not Britain could avoid the disaster that confronted her of either military destruction or loss of independence of action to an all-powerful Germany. To Halifax there were two ways to do this; to fight and win, or to reach a negotiated settlement that protected Britain's independence and integrity. It was Churchill's apparent desire to cut this avenue of escape that so incensed the Foreign Secretary.

Halifax's diary for 27 May records that "Winston talked most frightful rot", and that he "does drive me to despair when he works himself up into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason".¹ Such was the Foreign Secretary's anger at Churchill's seeming

¹*Halifax Diary, 27th May. A7.8.4.*

determination to attempt national and imperial suicide, that "if it comes to the point, our ways would separate",¹ and he would resign. This was no minor disagreement,² but reflected the deep and dangerous choices that faced the British Government at this time. John Colville wrote at that time that the War Cabinet "are feverishly considering our ability to carry on the war" if the French collapsed, which was indeed the case, but continued saying "... there are signs that Halifax is being defeatist. He says our aim can no longer be to crush Germany, but rather to preserve our own integrity and independence".³ Although the analysis of Halifax's thinking is correct, Colville is clearly in error to regard this as merely the Foreign Secretary's reasoning, it was shared by the War Cabinet as a whole and beyond, and is also mistaken in his use of the word "defeatist". This is unfair. Halifax wished an option to be considered and, if it entailed defeat, to be rejected. Such actions are not normally considered as due to defeatism. Although it would mean seeking peace at a very low ebb in Britain's fortunes, Halifax's contention was that in view of the possibility of the military position worsening, it might be better to try for a settlement sooner rather than later.

Lord Halifax returned to his theme of the desirability of exploring the possibilities of Italian mediation for the last time on 28 May. Again he "thought that we ought to be prepared to consider" terms which "would not affect our independence".⁴ It was not that the probability of achieving such terms was increasing, it was still "a most unlikely" hypothesis, but that by agreeing in principle to such a course of action, the Cabinet would have given itself a *via media*

¹Halifax Diary, 27th May. A7.8.4.

²Cadogan's Diary, 27th May, shows, along with a residual hostility towards Churchill, an appreciation of the seriousness of Halifax's contemplation of resignation, urging him to do nothing without first talking with Chamberlain. *Cadogan Diaries*, 27th May. p.291.

³John Colville, *The Fringes of Power, Downing Street Diaries 1939-1955*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.1985. p.140-141. 27th May. Subsequently: *Colville Diary*.

⁴Cab 65/13, WM(40)145, 28th May.

other than Churchill's death or glory position. In support of his arguments, the Foreign Secretary warned, in contradiction to the Prime Minister, that:

"... we must not ignore the fact that we might get better terms before France went out of the war and our aircraft factories were bombed, than we might get in three months time".

This was a vital line of reasoning to Halifax and, as will be shown later, was one of the most important elements of division between himself and his colleagues. To the Foreign Secretary, France was still an important weight on the Allied side of the balance; to Churchill and Chamberlain she had become a burden trying to drag Britain with her to defeat.¹ Even towards the end of the discussions Halifax "still did not see what there was in the French suggestion of trying out the possibilities of mediation which the Prime Minister felt was so wrong". He had clearly neither been won over nor given ground, yet the subject was not raised again in Cabinet. Outside the Cabinet, however, there continued to be rumours about Halifax's attitude. According to Harvey, Charles Peake of the Foreign Office News Department had said that the Foreign Secretary "had been anxiously exploring the possibility of peace à la Lansdowne".² The same writer was also "slightly worried ... by the text of telegram" to Paris, giving the reply to Reynaud. This was because it "seems to envisage possibility of Musso mediating at a later date".³ Harvey was correct in his reading of the telegram, but wrong when he lays responsibility for it solely at Halifax's door. This telegram, as shown earlier,⁴ was sent with the full

¹ Cab 65/13, WM(40)145, 28th May.

² Harvey Diary, 2nd June. Add Mss 56396.

³ Harvey Diary, 29th May. Add Mss 56396.

⁴ See p.221; also Chamberlain Diary, 28th May. NC 2/24a. Cabinet "finally agreed on a reply drafted by me."

agreement of Churchill and Chamberlain, even if it did seem "incredible" to Harvey, it was none the less true.

The reasons for Halifax not returning to the subject of mediation will be turned to later, but before this it is necessary to examine the views of the two other principal participants in these discussions, Churchill and Chamberlain.

The most important voice in discussions on British policy in war is usually that of the Prime Minister. In this case, that importance was not as great as would usually be the case. Although Churchill had the authority of his office, and given that "in the final resort the Prime Minister can nearly always impose his will on the Cabinet",¹ he had only held this office for a little over a fortnight. Prime Ministers also usually have the backing of the majority party in the House of Commons; here again Churchill was unusual. He was in fact in a vulnerable position. Chamberlain was the leader of the Conservative Party and had received a majority of the votes in the Norway debate, and Halifax had been many people's first choice to replace him. When Churchill wrote "To a large extent I am in yr. hands" to Chamberlain on 10 May, he was not exaggerating.² By 26 May, the situation had not changed all that much, and in Whitehall there was still considerable anti-Churchill feeling. Sir Alec Cadogan expressed his feelings in no uncertain terms in his diary. On 27 May, after Halifax had said "I can't work with Winston any longer", Cadogan sympathised, saying "... his rhodomontades probably bore you as much as they do me". Later, on the same subject, Cadogan told the Foreign Secretary that he "hoped he really wouldn't give way to an annoyance to which we were all subject ..."³ The day before he summed up his feelings more succinctly: "WSC too rambling and romantic and sentimental and temperamental. Old

¹ *Halifax Diary*, 15th May. Chamberlain to Halifax, who thought this "quite true". A7.8.4.

² For an excellent summary of this see Reynolds, p.102.

³ *Cadogan Diaries*, 27th May. p.291.

Neville still the best of the lot".

It was therefore without many of the buttresses to a Prime Minister's authority that Churchill approached the deliberations on Italian mediation. The policy associated with the Prime Minister has traditionally been that Britain would "never quit the war whatever happens till Hitler is beat or we cease to be a state".¹ Britain, he said the same day, was "not prepared to give in on any account. We would rather go down fighting than be enslaved to Germany".² This was good oratory, but to confuse oratory with policy would be to make Churchill out to be a far too one-dimensional figure, and if we are to discover the Prime Minister's real attitude towards Britain's continuation of the war - the issue behind any Italian mediation - then the cardboard cut-out image needs to be put to one side.

On the morning of Reynaud's visit to London, with the fate of the BEF in the balance, Churchill outlined his policy. The objective, he said, was not just "peace and security" - as Halifax had stated - because these could be "achieved under a German domination of Europe". Instead:

"We must ensure our complete liberty and independence. He was opposed to any negotiation which might lead to a derogation of our rights and power".³

It was not negotiations per se that he was opposed to, but those which would be to Britain's national disadvantage. The crucial issue was no longer Poland, or whether Hitler would have continental hegemony or even whether Hitler's word could be trusted, but whether a peace would damage Britain's freedom of independent action. The likelihood of receiving acceptable terms was nevertheless small, as Germany's "quarrel

¹Churchill letter to the King of the Belgians, 26th May. Gilbert, p.407.

²Cab 65/13, WM (40)140, 26th May.

³Cab 65/13, WM(40)139, 26th May. Before Reynaud arrived.

was not with France but with England".

During the Cabinet discussions with the French Premier, Churchill's exact position was clearly expounded, as Chamberlain recorded in his diary:

"The PM disliked any move towards Musso. It was incredible that Hitler would consent to any terms that we could accept though if we could get out of this jam by giving up Malta, Gibraltar and some African colonies he would jump at it".¹

Thus even Churchill would allegedly "jump at" a peace infinitely worse than that rejected by his predecessor during the previous October. But as such a settlement was unlikely in the extreme, what did Churchill advocate? He continued to explain that "the only safe way was to convince Hitler that he couldn't beat us. We might do better without the French than with them if they tied us to a conference into which we should enter with our cause lost beforehand". This plan, of cutting themselves off from France and of attempting "to convince Hitler that he couldn't beat us", was one which Churchill elaborated over the following days, and which was to become the foundation of British policy during the following months. The aim was not the single-mindedly bellicose pursuit of military victory, but to restore a position of military stalemate so that if negotiations were to occur they would be more favourable to Britain.

After Reynaud had left London, the minutes of the War Cabinet discussions open with the Prime Minister setting out the case for the separate situations of France and Britain being taken as the basis for differing policies. Saying that "we were in a different position from

¹*Chamberlain Diary, 26th May. NC 2/24a.*

France", Churchill highlighted two crucial aspects of this for the future of British policy. Firstly, "we still had powers of resistance and attack, which they had not", and secondly, that Germany would offer "decent terms" to France whereas there "was no limit to the terms which Germany would impose on us if she had her way".¹ Both of these were, to the Prime Minister, powerful reasons for continuing the struggle. For him, mediation by Mussolini would mean that Britain "invited him to go to Herr Hitler and ask him to treat us nicely". Therefore he concluded "We must not get entangled in a position of that kind ...". Had Churchill stopped there, there would be grounds for the claim that he said, "We will never surrender". But he did not, and the complete sentence alters the perception of his policy. The sentence reads "We must not get entangled in a position of that kind before we had been involved in any serious fighting". In other words, it was not the idea of mediation by a third party which he objected to, but mediation now, before Britain had fought her battle for survival. Thus the question of peace should, in Churchill's view, be postponed until the direct clash between British and German power had occurred, with the terms of any settlement being dependent upon its outcome. For the moment, because there was really "no such option ... open to us" of a settlement based on German colonies and "certain concessions in the Mediterranean", the choice was between fighting on and terms that severely curtailed Britain's power. It is interesting to note that if these really were the only alternatives then Halifax also felt that such terms should be refused, the main difference between himself and Churchill being that because Mussolini was "in a most uncomfortable position" there might have been a chance of a middle way.

In an unsigned note, written probably either on 26 or 27 May,

¹Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May. Churchill also said, "If France could not defend herself it was better that she should get out of the war rather than that she should drag us into a settlement which involved intolerable terms".

Churchill set out the reasoning behind his position. Intercession by Italy at that time was opposed because it would lead "to an armistice and conference under the conditions of our being at Hitler's mercy".¹ Although objectionable enough in itself, this mirror-image of Versailles was ultimately unacceptable because:

"Such a conference would only end in weakening fatally our power to resist the terrible terms which will almost certainly be imposed, if not upon France, at any rate upon Britain".

Nevertheless, with another glance at the uncertain future, he wrote "We do not feel unable to continue the struggle, and our people would never allow us to quit until we have fought our fight". But what if the fight was lost? This is a question which will be considered later. For the moment, however, "... we do not see any way but to fight on, and we have good hopes of holding out till some deep change occurs in Germany or Europe. We do not therefore wish to do anything which will impair the resolve of our nation". Before he raised the central issue of the morale of the British people being broken by the discovery of projected negotiations, Churchill's hope of a "deep change" in Germany and Europe as the basis of a British victory is most interesting in regard to what it leaves out. There was no reference to a "deep change" of a different nature in the United States, a theme so often referred to elsewhere. Before leaving this memorandum on the question of Italian mediation, Churchill mentioned two other objectives; that Britain's "fighting power might be reduced in the process", and that "neither we nor you [would] escape from our misfortunes". Again it was the purely practical effects of a mediated

¹*Prem 3/174/4, ps.11-13. Note on PM's notepaper, unsigned but in Churchill's handwriting.*

agreement which formed the basis of the Prime Minister's opposition.

In the Cabinet discussions of 27 May, Churchill, after repeating his determination not to get trapped by France into making a bad peace, and after the comment that "it would not be a bad thing for this country to go down fighting ... Nazi tyranny",¹ which so angered Halifax, was then involved in an exchange of views about how peace terms would be dealt with. The Prime Minister's response to Halifax's raising of the broader question of Italian mediation was clearly one of anger; "the issue which the War Cabinet was called upon to settle was difficult enough without getting involved in the discussion of an issue which was quite unreal and most unlikely to arise", he replied. However, he said that "If Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the terms of the restoration of German colonies and the overlordship of Central Europe, that was one thing. But it was quite unlikely that he would make any such offer". After Churchill outlined what would be acceptable, which was broadly what Britain had gone to war to prevent, Chamberlain added to this that there "would be no difficulty" in deciding "what were and what were not" terms Britain considered essential. As to the way terms might be offered, the Prime Minister, in response to Halifax's questioning, said that "he would not join France in asking for terms, but if he were told what the terms offered were, he would be prepared to consider them". The War Cabinet would not, however, be willing to send a delegate to receive terms from Hitler.

The Cabinet had, under the Foreign Secretary's goading, gone a very long way in its consideration of both a proposed Italian mediation and the terms of peace which would be acceptable. Although Churchill was clearly reluctant to discuss the subject of negotiating Britain's way out of the crisis, he was unable to avoid it because it was a realistic option.

¹*Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.*

Many questions had been answered as regards the Government's policy, but there were still more left unanswered. The discussions of the following day did little to alter this, apart from achieving agreement on the telegram to be sent to Reynaud.¹ Churchill read to the Cabinet a draft of this, with once again the fear of getting embroiled in damaging negotiations being an important argument. "If we once get to the table", he said, "we should then find that the terms offered us touched our independence and integrity. When, at this point, we got up to leave the Conference table, we should find that all the forces of resolution which are now at our disposal would have vanished". This was a vital point; one apparently not appreciated by the Foreign Secretary. Once negotiations began, then in a war of peoples not just of armies, it would be difficult if not impossible to re-kindle the determination to see the war through. This would deprive Britain of what was seen as one of her main advantages.² Such a scenario was to the Prime Minister extremely unlikely as "It was impossible to imagine that Herr Hitler would be so foolish as to let us continue our re-armament. In effect, his terms would put us completely at his mercy". The chance of "decent terms being offered to us at the present time were a thousand to one against" he added later. With such odds, fighting seemed the only way out. This did not necessarily mean that victory was the only way out, there was no guarantee of that, but, even if things went badly, in the Prime Minister's view Britain had nothing to lose: "We should get no worse terms if we went on fighting, even if we were beaten, than were open to us now". And later, "A time might come when we felt that we had to put an end to the struggle, but the terms would not then be more mortal than those offered to us now".

¹Gilbert, p.422.

²See the Chiefs of Staff memorandum "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality", Cab 66/7, WP(40)168, 25th May. Morale was highlighted as one of the three most crucial factors in Britain's survival, as long as people realise "that the existence of the Empire is at stake". Negotiations would destroy this conviction.

Churchill was determined to fight on, not in hope of certain victory, but because in his opinion all the different alternatives seemed to point in that direction at that time. On the evening of 28 May, he expressed this view to a meeting of the Ministers of Cabinet rank, designed to keep them informed what the five War Cabinet members were thinking. They, he informed his Cabinet colleagues afterwards, "had expressed the greatest satisfaction when he told them that there was no chance of our giving up the struggle".¹ Hugh Dalton wrote that Churchill had told them that "It was idle to think that if we tried to make peace now, we should get better terms from Germany than if we went on and fought it out ...".² As P.M.H. Bell has written, "Is it too much to construe Churchill's remark about the futility of thinking that Britain could get better terms by immediate negotiations as a counter to Halifax's statement in the War Cabinet that she might get better terms?"³ The present writer's opinion is that just such a construction would be most valid.

The Prime Minister was not opposed to a negotiated solution to the conflict with Hitler's Germany despite the problem of Hitler keeping his word, but he did not see any realistic opportunity of it at that time. In two or three months, circumstances might be different, but for the present he also chose to guide Britain along the tightrope between the devil of German invasion and the deep blue sea of a peace conference. Where the other end of the tightrope was attached was obscure, but such matters would be dealt with when they were reached, and not before.

Throughout the discussions on Italian mediation the two Labour members of the Cabinet, Attlee and Greenwood, said very little, but when they did contribute it was clearly against any proposed mediation

¹*Others have challenged this view - for example Reith. .*

²*Dalton Diary, 28th May. Part 1/22.*

³*Bell, pp.46-7. Also Reynolds, p.104.*

plan. Chamberlain records that "Greenwood ... argued that we had a good chance of outlasting Hitler", but, the former Prime Minister commented, he "did not give me the impression that he had thought things out".¹ With the two newest ministers not contributing much, the other main voice in the deliberations was that of Chamberlain. His arguments about the necessity or advisability of negotiating a settlement changed considerably during the month of May, and for a proper understanding of these it is worth looking back before the 26th.

On 15 May Halifax's diary records that Chamberlain was a "good deal shaken by political events"² and a day later the former Prime Minister noted a conversation with the United States Ambassador, Joseph Kennedy, during which he revealed himself "shaken" by military events as well:

"I saw J. Kennedy this afternoon. He thought the French morale was broken and that they had no fight in them. He didn't see how we could fight on without them. I told him I did not see how we could either. It seemed to me that if the French collapsed our only chance of escaping destruction would be if Roosevelt made an appeal for an armistice, though it did not seem likely that the Germans would respond".³

This was indeed an exceedingly bleak prospect, with France defeated, Britain dependent upon France and the "only chance of escaping" resting on an appeal which would probably fail. Had Chamberlain still thought this on 26 May, the discussions in Cabinet, and therefore the course of the war, could well have taken a dramatically different turn. Yet this was not the line he took, and the reasons for this change of attitude

¹*Chamberlain Diary*, 26th May. NC 2/24a.

²*Halifax Diary*, 15th May. A7.8.4.

³*Chamberlain Diary*, 16th May. NC 2/24a.

were crucial. Three days after the above conversation, the former Prime Minister had seen an alternative way of escape. Although he still expected "an ultimatum" soon from Germany, he thought "the terms will probably be such as to force us to fight on ...", with this fight being "only for better terms, not for victory".¹ The option he saw as providing a way out was to try and survive the onslaught, in Churchill's phrase to show the Germans that they could not win, whereupon Hitler would be forced to give "better terms". It was still going to be a desperate struggle, but at least - with future United States help - there was a light at the end of the tunnel. It was with this single hope that Chamberlain approached the crucial discussions of 26 to 28 May.

During the meeting of Cabinet ministers with Reynaud, Chamberlain "supported" Halifax's argument that "there could be no harm in trying Musso and seeing what the result was. If the terms were impossible we could still reject them".² As mentioned above, Chamberlain thought that "the terms will probably be such as to force us to fight on", but there was always a chance that they might be acceptable. It was a remote chance, but at that time he thought there was "no harm" in trying it. After Reynaud had left, and Greenwood had arrived, "the problem" of whether to seek Italian mediation was described by Chamberlain as "a very difficult one, and it was right to talk it out from every point of view".³ One of these points of view was Italy's position in the face of the enlarged power of Germany, which he felt was "no safer ... than any other country". Were Mussolini to feel the same way, reasoned Chamberlain, if he "were prepared to collaborate with us in getting tolerable terms, then we would be prepared to discuss Italian demands with him". In Chamberlain's mind, such an arrangement would

¹*Chamberlain Diary, 19th May. NC 2/24a.*

²*Chamberlain Diary, 26th May. NC 2/24a.*

³*Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.*

have provided a solution, but he never regarded it as very likely. Despite this remote possibility of a mediated peace settlement, Chamberlain wrote in his diary:

"... but it looks as though it would be best for us to fight on in the hope of maintaining sufficient air strength to keep the Germans at bay 'til other forces can be mobilized perhaps in the USA".¹

Like Halifax, Chamberlain was not at this stage opposed to an attempted mediation by Mussolini, but, like Churchill, he regarded this as so unlikely to bring success now that it "would be best for us to fight on ...". However on one thing all were agreed, that "it is a terrible position for France and ourselves, the most terrible in our history".

The Lord President of the Council contributed very little to the discussions on 27 May of the wider issues of Italian mediation and the future of the war, so it was the following day that his attitude became clear. He was, he said, opposed to "mediation at this stage, in the presence of a great disaster, and at a time when many people might think that we had no more resources left". In this he differed from Halifax, who supported mediation precisely because of the magnitude of the "great disaster". Chamberlain's opposition was based on "the most unfortunate results" that would accrue. These "unfortunate results" could be avoided, however, because Britain still "had resources left to us of which we could make good use", in order to "hold out"; after which "we should be able to obtain terms which would not affect our independence". The Lord President's view was that Britain's war aim was now "terms which would not affect our independence", and, unlike the Foreign Secretary, he felt that these would be best achieved after further fighting.

¹*Chamberlain Diary, 26th May. NC 2/24a.*

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Chamberlain sided with Churchill completely, although this was undoubtedly the net effect of his arguments. The Lord President continued, saying:

"... he did not see what we should lose if we said openly that, while we would fight to the end to preserve our independence, we were ready to consider decent terms if such were offered to us".¹

This was not a sentiment shared by the Prime Minister, who thought that to announce such a thing would weaken morale. Nor was his statement that he "was in agreement" with Halifax's view that "if we thought it was possible that we could now get terms which, although grievous, would not threaten our independence, we should be right to consider such terms". Where he and the Foreign Secretary differed was not so much the principle of obtaining terms, but as to whether "it was possible" to get such terms "now". Chamberlain "did not think it could be said" that this "would be likely" now, particularly as Paris had not yet fallen. In fact, "he thought that an approach to Italy was useless at the present time". Churchill thought the odds were "a thousand to one against", while Greenwood, despite the "gamble" of any other cause, did "not feel that this was a time for ultimate capitulation".² Negotiations, even if they started, which was unlikely in the extreme, themselves "involved a considerable gamble" according to Chamberlain, but "it might be that we should take a different view in a short time, possibly even a week". What could happen within a week to make a difference to the prospects of negotiation? Chamberlain is not specific, but it is most likely that this related to the fall of Paris crowning Hitler's success, and the evacuation of the BEF from

¹ Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.

² Halifax's protest that "nothing in his suggestion could even remotely be described as ultimate capitulation" fell on deaf ears.

Dunkirk deciding Britain's ability to fight on.

The Cabinet discussions of 28 May ended with agreement on the reply to be sent to Reynaud, but with little else specifically settled, especially in regard to the future of British policy towards the war in the long term. Yet the fact that Halifax particularly did not return to the subject suggests that some sort of tacit decision had been reached. Before discussing the nature of this decision, a few comments can be made on the framework of the discussions that brought it about. For the Foreign Secretary, the Italian mediation plan offered a slender hope of an acceptable, though disadvantageous, termination of hostilities before any further disasters occurred and while France was still a factor on the Allied side. Whatever the eventual outcome, negotiations that offered such a hope ought to be tried first. For Churchill, asking for Italian mediation at that time was the first step on a slippery slope that would lead to certain national disaster because no acceptable terms would be offered and because Italian mediation would not help solve Britain's problems. He felt that to attempt it would be both fatally wounding to public morale, and also not yet absolutely essential as Britain still had powers of resistance. Once Britain had proved that she could not be beaten, all would be different; either terms would be unnecessary, or - more likely - would be much more lenient and so could be accepted. Either way there was no alternative now but to fight on. For Chamberlain, there was nothing wrong in attempting an agreement at that time, it was just that the one on offer would not have achieved the required results. Therefore Britain ought to continue the fight in the hope of achieving better terms rather than throw away her few remaining advantages in vain pursuit of acceptable terms now. As the British reply to Reynaud said, "It would be a tragedy if by too hasty an acceptance of defeat we threw away a chance that was almost within our grasp of securing an

honourable issue from the struggle". For all three men, and for their Cabinet colleagues, the overriding criterion was the likelihood of proposals achieving what was required in the absence of a power willing . and able to act in a decisive way on Britain's behalf, and what this requirement stipulated was the preservation of Britain's independence and power to defend herself. There was no discussion of whether negotiations ought not to be carried out with the present German Government, or whether Hilter's signature was worth obtaining. Such questions were of no immediate consequence; what mattered was whether Britain could escape from her present situation without being defeated. It was purely on this pragmatic level that the matter was decided.

CHAPTER 8WAIT AND SEE: THE DECISION TO FIGHT ON

J.R.M. Butler, in the Official History of this period of the war, wrote that during the days of France's impending collapse, the Prime Minister's attitude "expressed the resolution of his colleagues and the whole country".¹ This was indeed true, but it leaves unanswered the precise question of what they were resolved to do. The object of this resolution, the policy followed during and after Dunkirk, will be the subject of this chapter. However, before discussing this, it is necessary to establish that there was a decision about the policy to be pursued despite there being no record in the Cabinet minutes of such a conclusion. As P.M.H. Bell points out "the nearest approach made by the British Cabinet to considering negotiations with Germany at the time of the fall of France"² was between 26 and 28 May, rather than in mid-June when the Franco-German armistice was signed. The reason for this is that whereas the initial realisation of France's impending defeat caused a time of rapid policy adjustments, the armistice occurred when a policy had already been settled, and was being pursued irrespective of events outside Britain.

The policy adopted by the Churchill Government, without exception, from about 28 May 1940 and pursued for the rest of the summer, was in essence that long-term questions should be avoided while the issue of whether Britain could survive or not was fought out. What would follow once the answer to this question became clear was another matter; for the next few months it was necessary to "wait and see" what happened. The first airing of this view was when Churchill urged that "it was best to decide nothing" about the French idea of approaching Mussolini "until we saw how much of the army we

¹ *J.R.M. Butler*, p.103.

² *Bell*, p.38.

could re-embark from France",¹ because the "operation might be a great failure" or "we might save a considerable portion of the Force". This was clearly a stalling procedure, adopted in the hope of deflecting the Foreign Secretary from his arguments in favour of Italian mediation. Yet the fact that this was the case over the issue of the BEF does not mean that the similar argument adopted over Britain's ability to hold out had similar motivation. The "prospect of winning this war was remote"² after Dunkirk, yet the British Government had very little to say to Germany except that they were not going to give in.³ If the chances of winning remained "remote", however, with neither the USA nor Russia being involved directly in the conflict, it does not necessarily follow that the British Government would never have had anything to say to the Germans. For the moment it was necessary to wait and see, but for this to be more than inertia, there had to be definite advantages which would accrue from such a policy.

It was clear that Britain's international, strategic and military position was appalling at the end of May 1940, yet Churchill hoped that "If only we could stick things out for another three months, the position would be entirely different".⁴ The following day he repeated this view, stating "If after two or three months, we could show that we were still unbeaten, our prestige would return".⁵ In more precise terms, the Prime Minister wished to "put to the proof" the question of whether Britain was going to be "invaded and conquered".⁶ To show "the world that Germany had not beaten us".⁷ Although there was virtually complete agreement within Britain that such a policy ought

¹Cab 65/13 WM(40)140, 26th May. All dates are 1940 unless otherwise shown.

²J.R.M. Butler, p.196.

³Balfour, p.195, referring to talk by Richard Crossman in *RUSI Journal*, Vol.XCVII, August 1952.

⁴Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.

⁵Cab 65/13 WM(40)142, 27th May.

⁶Gilbert, p.644.

⁷Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.

to be pursued - what was less clear was what it would lead to. For the Prime Minister, as his notes for the Secret Session of Parliament on 20 June record "If get through next 3 months, get through next 3 years",¹ that survival would lead to victory. Or as John Colville described the mood of 14 June "If we can hold on until November we shall have won the war", as "the whale" had a chance to "show his superiority to the elephant".² Even Lloyd George agreed completely with the short-term policy being pursued - as he wrote in the Sunday Pictorial of 28 July, "We have first to prove to Hitler's satisfaction that this combination (i.e. of air, sea and ground defences) is invincible". However, in his mind what was to follow survival was not victory, but that "then we shall be in a position to discuss terms with him" (Hitler). Although the Prime Minister himself did not welcome such a result, he at least realised that it was a possibility, and not a dishonourable one at that. In the sixth paragraph of the telegram replying to Reynaud's attempts to buy off Italy, a policy of waiting upon events with "stout hearts and confidence in ourselves"³ was backed up by the claim that it "shall at once strengthen our hands in negotiations", and Churchill expressed himself in complete agreement with this.

The policy of waiting upon military events with determination was thus necessary for either future victory or future negotiations, but it also had other benefits. The telegram to Reynaud referred to above also noted that "stout hearts and confidence in ourselves" would draw "the admiration and perhaps the material help of the USA".⁴ It was not that American help was deemed absolutely necessary for immediate British survival - although modern aircraft and old destroyers were greatly needed - but that by surviving on her own

¹*Gilbert*, pp.578-9.

²*Gilbert*, p.548.

³*Cab 65/13, WM (40) 145, No.235 DIPP to Paris, 28th May.*

⁴*Ibid.*

Britain would prove herself worthy of such support if the war were to be continued to the defeat of Germany.¹ As the Canadian Prime Minister wrote on 30 May of assistance from the USA, "If, however, Britain and France could hold out for some months, aid could probably then be given".² As in other areas, it was holding out "for some months" that was the target.

Another, and possibly surprising, reason for waiting to see what happened in the military sphere before deciding about future policy was the strain this would put upon Germany. This was first expressed by the Minister without Portfolio, Arthur Greenwood, who said "that if we could maintain the struggle for some further weeks he thought that we could make use of our economic power in regard to raw materials, textiles and oil. Stocks in Germany were very depleted".³ Or as Churchill said the following day "If we can hold out for some time, there are a good many factors which may produce a state of affairs where the enemy cannot carry on the war, e.g. effects of our blockade of Germany on economic position there, particularly as regards food-stuffs and oils, dissatisfaction and the loss of morale in Germany ...".⁴ These attitudes are clear hang-overs from the exaggerated belief in German economic and social weakness often expressed in earlier months.

So far, although it has been said that the policy of wait and see depended upon military developments, there has been no attempt to specify exactly which were felt to be crucial. While this point will be examined in considerable detail later, it is necessary now to mention one of them, and that is the fate of the RAF. Lord Halifax commented that "The Prime Minister had said that two or three months

¹*The question of Churchill's hopes in the USA is important and will be discussed later.*

²FO 800/310, 30th May, Mackenzie King to Churchill.

³Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.

⁴Prem 4/43B/1, Teleg No.2 77, 27th May. Prime Minister to High Commissioners in Dominions.

would show whether we were able to stand up against the air risk".¹ In other words, that "wait and see" could be defined as waiting to see if the Luftwaffe could beat the RAF. Or, again, in Halifax's words "that the future of the country hinged on whether the enemy's bombs happened to hit our aircraft factories", which was to a large measure an accurate assessment of Britain's position. The destruction of the RAF and its production base would not only mean the aerial devastation of the country, but more important immediately, the survival of the air force was also the most essential protection against invasion.

For all the above reasons, the British Government "were convinced that the next three months were vital".² It was around this that the disparate views of 26 and 28 May coalesced. But although, in Paul Addison's words, Churchill "was truly leading a coalition, of war aims as well as of parties",³ this was in essence a temporary agreement on aims. For some, notably Churchill and Attlee, "if we could hold out for this period (3 months) we should win".⁴ Yet for Halifax, and probably Chamberlain as well, the future was far less certain. The Foreign Secretary's diary records that, "if" Britain can "hold the devils for two or three months there is quite a chance that the situation may turn out in our favour".⁵ This was not only a very different assessment from that of the Prime Minister, and a far more realistic one as well, but it also envisaged a future where the continuation of war was impossible. For Halifax the winning of the war was a "chance" dependent upon an "if", but crucially "for the present, at least, there is no alternative".

When the Prime Minister was reported to have said that "Of course,

¹ Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.

² Harvey Diary, 31st May. Add Mss 56396.

³ Paul Addison, 'Lloyd George and Compromise Peace', in A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.) *Lloyd George: twelve essays*. London: Hamilton, 1971. p.381.

⁴ Harvey Diary, 31st May. Add Mss 56396.

⁵ Halifax Diary, 17th June. A7.8.4.

whatever happens at Dunkirk, we shall fight on",¹ to the Meeting of Government Ministers on 28 May, he was expressing the Government's determination to wait upon further military events rather than be forced to negotiate by the collapse of France. Although the wait and see policy depended upon military events, these were events in and above Britain - not in France. It was this decision not to regard "the present land battle" as "decisive one way or another for Great Britain" which opened the way for the policy based on delaying long-term decisions. Had the battle in France been regarded as decisive, then questions about the future of the war might have been precipitated, because "If we failed, we should then have to surrender".² Dunkirk, although of the utmost importance to the prospects of a successful policy of survival, was not crucial in the decision to attempt such a policy. In what senses, then, were military developments crucial? These were in regard to the ability to survive, and then in the decision as to whether the war should be continued afterwards in an attempt to defeat Germany or whether a negotiated agreement should be reached. The first of these is obvious, but the second is not so clear cut. On some occasions, Churchill appeared to deny that there were two, separate, issues involved; that the only question was to surrender or to fight until victory; for example, when saying that Britain would "defend the Island, the Empire and our Cause",³ or in the House of Commons on 28 May:

"I have only to add that nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves; nor should

¹*Dalton Diary, 28th May. Part 1/22.*

²*Cab 69/1, DO(40)14, 8th June. Churchill at meeting of Ministers and Chiefs of Staff.*

³*Simon Papers, 29th May, Churchill's "Strictly Confidential" note. Mss Simon 86.*

it destroy our confidence in our power to make our way,
as on former occasions in our history, through disaster
and through grief to the ultimate defeat of our
enemies".¹

Whether these statements represent Government policy needs serious questioning. Although it is true that "whatever may happen on the Continent ... we shall ... defend the Island"², the association with this of the defence of "the Empire and our Cause" was not automatic, and was known not to be so. Similarly, for Churchill to say that "nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves"³ was inaccurate in that the Government had not "vowed" to defend a world cause, but an island, which was far from being the same thing. In reality, the situation created by the impending French collapse was that described in the concluding section of the Prime Minister's telegram to the Dominions of 27 May. After noting that there "could be no question at this stage ... (of) deciding not to carry on", he continued;

"This view is of course without prejudice to consideration of any proposals that might hereafter be put forward for a cessation of hostilities and subject to developments in the military situation which is now liable to change from hour to hour".⁴

Although the Government was determined not to surrender British integrity and independence, there was a realisation that "of course"

¹Hansard, Vol.361, Column 422, 28th May.

²Simon Papers, Churchill's note, 29th May. Mss Simon 86.

³Hansard, Vol.361, Col.422, 28th May.
There was a substantial element of propaganda in this speech which makes it suspect as a guide to policy.

⁴Prem 4/43B/1, Teleg. No.2 77, 27th May.

This is expressed as the view of the whole war Cabinet.

there was more than one way of achieving this, and once achieved by fighting the war would not necessarily be continued. As the Prime Minister's notes for the Secret Session of 20 June read, "But all depends on winning this battle here in Britain, now this summer".¹ The matter "was now to be put to the proof", as he later wrote.²

P.M.H. Bell has written that Weygand's decision to "defend the Somme - Aisne Line at all costs", thus making it the "supreme test", carried with it the "danger that a German breakthrough there might bring a fresh wave of despair".³ Churchill also decided to make a supreme test, where failure would be the touchstone for ending the war, but it was not the events at Dunkirk that were critical - although the "miracle" there certainly encouraged many in Britain to believe that it was worth trying to hold out. Instead, Britain's equivalent of the "Somme - Aisne Line" was Fighter Command and its survival was the supreme factor governing future policy. This test, which began with the attempt to interrupt the Luftwaffe over Dunkirk, was to continue throughout the summer in the Battle of Britain. Until it had been discovered whether the RAF could prevent the country being invaded or reduced to submission through bombing, there was no point in speculating about the future of the war.

The fact that the British Government could decide upon a policy of "wait and see" in the short-run reveals how different was their position from that of France. The French armistice was signed, not because they had no choice, but because the only alternative to peace, military subjugation, was perceived as the worse option. In Britain, however, there was not - or was not yet - the same imperative of foreign occupation to necessitate an armistice, and any peace would be an unmitigated disaster because her future security would be put in

¹*Gilbert*, pp.578-9.

²*Gilbert*, p.644.

³*Bell*, p.35.

fatal jeopardy. Not only this, it would be a disaster which might be avoidable. "Wait and see" was thus based upon the twin consideration that peace was not only inadvisable, but neither was it clearly necessary. It is these considerations that will be turned to next.

There were, as Churchill informed the Dominion Prime Ministers "solid reasons behind our resolve" which, on the issue of immediate survival, stemmed from the fact that "I do not regard the situation as having passed beyond our strength" and the belief that "... Hitler will have to break us in this Island or lose the war".¹ As he had written earlier to the Dominions, the Cabinet's "view that there could be no question at this stage ... of our giving up the contest in the event of the French deciding not to carry on" was based on the existence of the "undefeated" navy and the "formidable air force" which was still "in being".² There was thus "no need at present" to contemplate what terms Germany might force upon Britain.³ This assessment of the situation as put forward by the Chiefs of Staff - that peace was not to be discussed until after Britain had fought her battle - was generally accepted, both within the Government and outside after the end of May, and represented a considerable triumph for the Prime Minister over the view of such as the Foreign Secretary. Peace was thus rejected partly because it was unnecessary, as the Joint Planning Sub-Committee concluded on 11 June, "We can conceive of no peace offer which Germany might make in the near future and which would be acceptable to us while our armed forces remained in being".⁴ It was also repudiated because any terms would probably be so disastrous that fighting on could only improve Britain's position relative to Germany. "Hitler thought that he had the whip hand. The only thing to do was to show him that he could not conquer this country".⁵ The very fact of

¹Prem 4/43B/1, pp.276-8, 16th June.

²Prem 4/43B/1, Teleg. No. Z 77. 27th May.

³Prem 3/468, pp.194-5, 20th May. Churchill to Roosevelt.

⁴Cab 84/15 JP(40)235, 11th June.

⁵Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.

Britain's survival of the expected onslaught would, it was felt, automatically improve her position if negotiations became necessary later. Rather than accept the "tragedy" of "too hasty acceptance of defeat", the Cabinet urged that the Allies "grasp" the chance "of securing an honourable issue from the struggle" by holding on. Not only would Allied continuation of the struggle improve their lot, it would significantly increase the "losses and hardships" of Germany.¹ This belief that the Nazi state, economy and society were brittle and could be undermined by a mere continuation of the war was still prevalent at this time, and although not a decisive argument in favour of the "wait and see" policy, did appear to offer some prospect of a more hopeful result afterwards. Continuing the war - at least for the rest of the year - could then only result in an enhancing of British prospects, whether in war or peace, a conviction summed up in Churchill's notes for the Secret Session of Parliament, "If Hitler fails to invade or destroy Britain he has lost the war".²

Had there never been any thought of attempting to negotiate a settlement with Germany there would consequently have been very little consideration of the nature of any peace terms that might have been offered because they would have been irrelevant. Because there was the option of negotiated settlement, there was also discussion of the projected nature of any terms. The agreement within the Government that any terms likely to be offered by Germany would be unacceptable represented the adoption of the Prime Minister's position. On 28 May, in speaking to non-Cabinet ministers, Dalton records that Churchill said "It was idle to think that if we tried to make peace now we should get better terms from Germany than if we went on and fought it out".³ This view was also expressed by the Prime Minister a day earlier when

¹*Cab 65/13, WM (40) 145, No.235 DIPPP to Paris, 28th May.*

²*Gilbert, pp.578-9.*

³*Dalton Diary, 28th May. Part 1/22.*

he commented that "Even if we were beaten, we should be no worse off than we should be if we were now to abandon the struggle",¹ and was not shared at that time by the Foreign Secretary.² In rebuttal of the arguments used above of his War Cabinet colleagues about the benefits of continuing to fight, Halifax stressed the advantages of negotiations at that time; namely that France would still be in the war as a negotiating partner, and that Britain's air power and potential were still in existence. These, he maintained, were powerful bargaining counters, not to be thrown away lightly. It is not clear exactly what it was that caused Halifax to change his point of view on this issue, but it is probable that it was the rapid deterioration in the French position after 28 May³ and the improvement in that of Britain as the army came back from Dunkirk. What is certain, however, is that by 17 June, the Foreign Secretary agreed that Britain's only hope was to fight on.⁴

By 17 June all the War Cabinet agreed with what the Prime Minister had said earlier, that to hold out for the time being would be better than to accept German terms, and, as already stated, one of the reasons for this was the expected nature of any German peace terms. In his terms of reference to the Chiefs of Staff Committee requesting them to consider "the prospects of our continuing the war alone", Churchill asked them to keep in mind that terms might be "offered to Britain which would place her entirely at the mercy of Germany through disarmament, surrender of naval bases in the Orkney's, etc..."⁵ A similar estimate of the nature of any German peace proposals was reached by the Joint Planning Sub-Committee on 10 June when, discussing the

¹Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.

²See Bell, pp.46-7.

³Halifax's hope had been for an Anglo-French approach which depended on France being able to hold out. Once it was clear that this was not going to be the case, a vital plank of his argument disappeared.

⁴Halifax Diary, 17th June. A7.8.4.

⁵Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.

military implications of such proposals, they concluded:

"We should be signing our own death warrant if we accepted any proposal which resulted in a lessening of our ability to maintain the United Kingdom as a secure naval and air base or to apply economic pressure to Germany. To this end our naval and air strength vis-a-vis Germany must be retained".¹

Thus the perceived options were "signing our own death warrant" or trying to hold out until better circumstances arrived. There was indeed "nothing for it but to fight on".² Even Lloyd George now thought this, writing, as noted earlier, that "We have first to prove to Hitler's satisfaction that this combination (of British power) is invincible".³ By 17 June, Lord Halifax, despite his earlier differences, was not only in agreement with Churchill about the "wait and see" policy of holding on for "two or three months", but he could also write that "Anyhow for the present, at least, there is no alternative".⁴ Thus, "for the present, at least" there was widespread agreement on the direction of Government policy among those with widely differing views about the future of the war. In the Prime Minister's words this was "to defend our island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny". Although for him this policy was to be pursued "If necessary for years", there would not necessarily be agreement about this within the Cabinet or the country. Short-term survival was, "At any rate, ... what we are going to try to do", said the Prime Minister, and future policy hung on the success or otherwise of this attempt.

Having thus decided to adopt a policy of "wait and see", what

¹ *Cab 84/15, JP(40)235, 11th June.*

² *Lorraine Papers, FO 1011/246, 26th June.*

³ *Sunday Pictorial, 28th July.*

⁴ *Halifax Diary, 17th June. A7.8.4.*

mattered was whether Britain could hold out in the short term or not. This is, of course, obvious, but the connection between immediate military events and the British Government's determination to carry on the war cannot be over-stated. As Churchill wrote to the British Ambassador in Washington on 25 June;

"What really matters is whether Hitler is master of Britain in three months or not. I think not. But this is a matter which cannot be argued beforehand".¹

With British national survival in the balance, and with Government policy wedded to the prospects of this survival, the crucial question was indeed that asked by the Chiefs of Staff on 26 May: "Could the United Kingdom hold out until assistance from the Empire and America made itself felt?"² Churchill, as he wrote in the above telegram to Lord Lothian, felt "good confidence we can repel invasion and keep alive in the air. Anyhow, we are going to try". Britain was "going to try" to "keep alive" - no more, just "keep alive" - and because this represented the Government's policy towards Germany at that time it is necessary to examine the foundations of the Prime Minister's "good confidence" and the factors which would decide whether future policy would be war or peace.

The first of these factors was the fall of France, which was chiefly responsible for the appalling position Britain found herself in. It is true that although there was a realisation very early that France might collapse, it was not clear for a long time whether this was certain to occur, and even if it did, what form of resistance might continue, and the position of the French State and Empire could not be foreseen. However, the possibility of a collapse of her main ally caused a deep examination of Britain's reaction to this "event-

¹Gilbert, p.607. *Churchill to Lothian.*

²Cab 66/7, WP(40)168, "*British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality*", 26th May.

uality". If France went out of the war, there could be an end to the Continental commitment made after so much reluctance just over a year earlier and a concentration on home defence. Churchill, determined to continue the fight whatever happened in France, at one point "seemed to think we might almost be better off if France did pull out and we could concentrate on defence here".¹ Another argument used by those who felt that on balance the disaster of a French withdrawal from the war would not be fatal was the point that with Daladier in particular still trying to "buy off Musso",² continued association with France might encourage the spread of defeatism across the Channel. The most important factor relating to the emerging French defeat was, nevertheless, not so much calculations of relative advantage, but whether it should affect Britain's fundamental aim of continuing to fight Germany. This was discussed at length on 8 June when "unanimous agreement" was reached that "whereas the present land battle was of great importance, it would not be decisive one way or the other for Great Britain".³ This decoupling of the fates of the Allies was central to the continuation of war, and to "wait and see", because it postponed the decisive battle and therefore any ultimate decision about the future. As Churchill broadcast on 17 June, "What has happened in France makes no difference to our actions and purpose".⁴ By that date, even Lord Halifax agreed "that we shall do better without the French than with them".⁵ Yet to pretend that the French defeat literally "makes no difference" was plainly untrue; it made a great deal of difference to everything else but the continuation of the war itself. Oliver Harvey summed this up well;

¹*Cadogan Diaries*, 26th May. p.290. He noted, "Not sure he's right".

²*Harvey Diary*, 30th May. Add Mss 56396.

³*Cab 69/1*, DO(40)14, 8th June.

⁴*Gilbert*, p.566.

⁵*Cab 67/7*, WP(40)169, 26th May.

"What hell it is having to fight battles with Allies!

Yet if the French do lose this battle, it will make the future infinitely more difficult for us fighting alone".¹

If the threatened French withdrawal from the war became actual, then the war would indeed become "infinitely more difficult"; so much so that a German victory became an almost overwhelming probability, and a British victory a very problematical "if".² By the time France made peace, Britain's reaction to this had already been worked out, as they attempted to deprive the Germans of as many of the advantages of victory as possible.

The most immediate problem facing the British Government as a result of the German advance in France and Belgium was the fate of the British Expeditionary Force, under its commander Lord Gort. Although Churchill said that "there was a good chance of getting off a considerable proportion"³ of the BEF, the general expectation was far less than this. Cadogan, on 27 May, only expected "a tiny fraction" to be evacuated, while Chamberlain expected no more than 30,000-40,000.⁴ By 28 May Halifax supposed that "a proportion" of the army would "get off",⁵ while the Prime Minister reported to Cabinet that Gort did not "rate very highly" the "chances of extricating the BEF from their dangerous situation".⁶ Although Churchill also told the Cabinet that "it would be idle to try to forecast the success of the operation at this stage", by the following day the position had, if anything, got worse. General Ironside's diary entry for 29 May records of Lord Gort; "I shan't see him again. A gallant man. Little we

¹Harvey Diary, 6th June. Add Mss 56396.

²Lothian Papers, 27th July. Smuts to Lothian. GD/17/404.

³Cab 65/13, WM(40)139, 26th May.

⁴Reynolds, p.104.

⁵Halifax Diary, 28th May. A7.8.4.

⁶Gilbert, p.416, Colville Diary, 28th May; also Cab 65/7 WM(40)144, 28th May.

thought a couple of weeks ago that this would be the end of the BEF".¹ Such then was the situation facing the British Army in France at the end of May 1940, and the "most extraordinary"² success at evacuating nearly all of the BEF was therefore all the more remarkable. As Ironside continued "I would never have believed it possible".

Although the success at Dunkirk seemed incredible, it is necessary to analyse in exactly what ways it was important for the continuation of the war against Germany. During the Cabinet discussions about the possible approaches to Italy, the Prime Minister had said "that it was best to decide nothing until we saw how much of the Army we could re-embark from France",³ yet a decision was reached on these matters before the success of the evacuation was known. The fact that the British Government decided to continue the war in the short term at least, while at the same time expecting most of the BEF to be captured, suggests that Dunkirk was not crucial to this decision. Britain did not adopt a wait-and-see posture while continuing to fight because of Dunkirk, but, to a great extent, despite of their expectations of Dunkirk. As Churchill told the House of Commons on 28 May "... nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves ..."⁴ Yet it would clearly be wrong to infer from this that the evacuation of the BEF was of only marginal significance for the future conduct of the war. The "miracle" of the evacuation was of the greatest significance, if not for the determination to try to hold out against Germany, then for

¹*Ironside Diary, 29th May*.p.344. When his entries for May and June are read together it is difficult to avoid the impression that his morale was extremely low and one wonders how, as Commander of Home Forces, he would have coped with an invasion.

²*Ironside Diary, 2nd June* . p.348.

³*Cab 65/13, WM(40)140, 26th May.*

⁴*Hansard, Vol.361, Column 422, 28th May.* What the Prime Minister was really referring to was the defence of Britain, not of "a world cause".

the ability to achieve this successfully at a time when invasion was thought by many to be imminent,¹ and for the morale of the nation. This was clearly stated by Churchill on 25 May when he told the Cabinet Defence Committee that, if France made peace, "he thought that we could hold out in this country once we had got our Army back from France".²

The reason for the increase in confidence in Britain's ability to defend herself after Dunkirk was not just the presence of an extra quarter of a million troops in the island - indeed in the short term, given the lack of useful equipment, this was almost the least of the benefits that accrued. There were other effects which were of greater immediate value and which held out greater hope for the future. The first of these was the tremendous morale boost received by the country as the BEF began to return to Britain. Between the position noted by Lord Sankey on 29 May: "There is great public anxiety and depression over the war. We fear our army in Belgium will be encircled and cut to pieces",³ and that recorded by the Daily Telegraph on 1 June, which had as its main headline "Defeat turned to Victory. 75 percent of the BEF already home",⁴ there was a huge and possibly crucial raising of confidence about the war. Yet despite the importance of this, there was still a chance of a collapse of public morale. Sir Henry Channon's diary for 2 June, although recording the

¹For some time it was not clear whether the Germans would follow up their victory in northern France by an attack on England or by a thrust against Paris and beyond.

²Cab 69/1, 25th May, DO(40) 9th Meeting.

³Sankey Diary, Bodleian Library, Mss Eng Hist. e 293, 29th May.

⁴Daily Telegraph, Leader article, "It has happened - the miracle by which alone, it was confidently predicted, the British Army in Northern France could be saved from capitulation or destruction". And also "Since there is more joy in a fear dismissed than in a hope fulfilled, the nation may not only feel pride but take encouragement from this heroic retreat. The story of it fortifies the soul, and nerves the nation to emulate that power to suffer and be strong which its fighting men have so splendidly displayed".

"heroic feat" and "relief to the whole country" of the evacuation, continued to reflect;

"... is this really the end of England? Are we witnessing, as for so long I have feared, the decline, the decay and perhaps the extinction of this great island people".¹

Or, again, as Lord Sankey commented, "Terrible news of our defeat and evacuation at Dunkerque".² Despite this, however, Dunkirk, far from being the signal for a collapse of public morale, was the beginning of an upturn that both encouraged and was led by the Churchill Government's stand.

The most important immediate result of the successful evacuation of the BEF related to the fact that it was possible to prevent the Luftwaffe destroying the trapped forces. On 26 May the Prime Minister had predicted that evacuation "would afford a real test of air superiority, since the Germans would attempt to bomb the ships and boats".³ By 1 June he was able to declare that this "real test" had turned out favourably. There would, Churchill said, "be no doubt that this constituted a signal victory for the Royal Air Force, which gave cause for high hopes of our successes in the future",⁴ which was a theme he elaborated in Parliament on 4 June, describing the feats of the RAF as "a victory inside this deliverance".⁵ As has been mentioned already, the Prime Minister made the fate of the RAF the supreme test for Britain, as the Weygand line was for France, and the initial results appeared to suggest that this test could be survived.

¹ *Channon Diary*, 2nd June . p.255.

² *Sankey Diary*, 1st June. *Mss Eng Hist.* e 293.

³ *Cab* 67/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.

⁴ *Cab* 65/7, WM(40)151, 1st June.

⁵ *Hansard*, Vol.361, Column 791, 4th June; also *Dalton Diary* for this date. *Diary*, Part 1/22.

With the return of the BEF, the "whole root and core and brain of the British Army", and the "great trial of strength between the British and German Air Forces",¹ there was indeed a great increase in both British confidence of being able to resist the forthcoming German attack and of determination to fight to the end for the country's independence and integrity. For those like Lord Halifax who had doubted the wisdom of such a policy without at least an attempt to find another way out, "the extrication of more of the BEF than he feared" - at that time "said to be 30,000"² - provided a considerable lift in morale which, once the final figure of over a quarter of a million was known, increased the willingness to let Churchill fight his battle. Added to this was the realisation by Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff that an invasion of Britain would be no simple matter, even if Germany was first able to obtain air superiority.

In a telegram to the Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, on 5 June, Churchill summed up the consequences of Dunkirk in the following way:

"British situation vastly improved by miraculous evacuation of BEF which gives us an army in the Island more than capable when re-equipped of coping with any invading force likely to be landed. Also evacuation was a main trial of strength between British and German Air Forces ... I therefore feel solid confidence in British ability to continue the war, defend the Island and the Empire, and maintain the blockade".³

¹Hansard, Vol.361, Column 788 & 791, 4th June. Churchill speaking.

²Dawson Diary, 30th May. Mss Dawson 44.

³FO 800/310 H/IX/150, 5th June.

This was indeed an accurate assessment of the importance of Dunkirk. It was not responsible for the Government's decision to fight on, but it did lead to a sharp increase in "confidence in British ability to continue the war". It was not the supreme test, and the Prime Minister deserves credit for persuading the country that this was so, but it helped to establish the conditions under which this ultimate test would be decided.

One of the clearest ways in which the war could have ended in 1940 would have been for the Germans to invade Britain, and naturally enough the prevention of this became the main preoccupation of the Government until the autumn. As has already been noted, in the aftermath of Dunkirk it was not immediately clear whether the Germans' next objective would be to continue the assault on France or to turn against Britain.¹ On 29 May, Channon recorded in his diary that "They expect invasion here next week".² Once it became clear that Hitler intended to finish off France first, there was a temporary respite from the immediate threat, but one which was ended by the French armistice. Sir Percy Lorraine, as he was leaving Italy on 19 June, noted that "It looks as though we shall be reaching the British Isles in the middle of the invasion!"³

Along with the threat of invasion came the determination to resist it. Britain, it became clear, had to "bear the full brunt"⁴ herself, and although "holding on is going to be a grim business",⁵ there was virtually unanimous agreement that this was the correct and the only course to pursue. Yet what was not nearly so clear was whether this resistance could be successfully accomplished. In the

¹See Reynolds, pp.104-5.

²Channon Diary, 29th May. p.255.

³Lorraine Diary, 19th June. FO 1011/246.

⁴Harvey Diary, 12th June. Add Mss 56396.

⁵Gilbert, p.548, Colville Diary, 14th June, Liddell Hart was now among those who thought similarly to the Government that security against invasion was the primary requisite of the moment. Liddell Hart Papers, "Notes for History", 18th July. Notes and Memoranda, 1940/73.

terms of reference of the Chiefs of Staff paper "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality" on 26 May, the Prime Minister set out the problem facing Britain in the following way:

"Can the Navy and Air Force hold out reasonable hopes of preventing serious invasion, could the forces gathered in this Island cope with raids from the air involving detachments not greater than 10,000 men".¹

It was, it should be noted, not anything approaching certainty which the Prime Minister hoped for, but merely "reasonable hopes", which again underlines the perilous nature of the gamble that was Government policy. The Committee's report is of great interest, as it clearly states what were the crucial factors facing the country. They concluded that;

"While our air force is in being, our navy and air force together should be able to prevent Germany carrying out a serious seaborne invasion of this country".

This analysis explained that the most important criterion was that "our air force is in being", and the paragraphs which followed outlined the probable situation if this ceased to be. The navy, they wrote, "could hold up an invasion for a time, but not for an indefinite period" - after which "our land forces would be insufficient to deal with a serious invasion".² Thus all depended on the RAF, and were this to be destroyed, it would be clear that an

¹ Cab 67/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.

² This is concurred with by Admiral Pridham, Flag Officer, Humber, who reported a meeting of the three service chiefs in the East Riding of Yorkshire. "The General's opening remark was: Admiral if you cannot prevent the Germans from landing on the coasts of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, they would be able to cut through the Country and be in Liverpool in forty-eight hours; I have insufficient weapons with which to slow them down let alone stop them". Pridham Memoirs, early July. Churchill College Cambridge.

invasion would probably succeed. This would have been a totally different situation from that which existed, requiring a review of the "wait and see" policy. As Churchill himself admitted later "There was always the possibility that victory over Britain in the air would bring about the end of the British resistance ..."¹ The fact of this precarious position was well known and, unsurprisingly, created considerable concern. For example, at the end of June Chamberlain recorded that Dill, the new CIGS, "is very worried and anxious about the invasion, feeling that the troops are not trained and may not be steady when the test comes".² Earlier in the month, the former Prime Minister had noted that neither the First Sea Lord nor Dill were confident "in the ability of the Navy to protect us", and that the "air force has been greatly weakened by the operations in France".³ "Thus", he concluded, "the horizon continues to darken day by day".

Britain would, as General Ironside reflected, be "hard put to it to keep ... (her) end up"⁴ because of the threat of large-scale sea and airborne invasion, but this was by no means the only way that Germany could have attempted to bring about an early negotiated settlement. As the Chiefs of Staff concluded on 26 May:

"There are three ways in which Germany might break down the resistance of the United Kingdom - unrestricted air attack aimed at breaking public morale, starvation of the country by attack on shipping and ports, and occupation by invasion".⁵

With this combination of threats there could be no certainty that

¹ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol.II, London: Cassell, 1949. p.283.

² Subsequently; Churchill.

³ Chamberlain Diary, 30th June. NC 2/24a.

⁴ Chamberlain Diary, 12th June. NC 2/24a.

⁵ Ironside Diary, 7th June. p.356.

⁶ Cab 66/7, WP(40)168. 26th May.

the Government's policy of wait and see would lead to a continuation of the war and it would be wrong to infer that the determination to fight on depended upon or implied overwhelming confidence in the ability to survive.¹ Although Churchill could write "I have good confidence in our ability to defend our Island",² Chamberlain was not convinced of the reality of this, writing that the "PM still affects confidence in the ability of the Navy to protect us ..."³ It was of course the Prime Minister's job to breathe encouragement and hope to the nation - which he did supremely well - and there is no denying that such confidence as he was able to impart was based upon a genuine conviction of the prospects for Britain. He certainly felt there were "solid reasons behind our resolve not to allow the fate of France whatever it may be to deter us from going on to the end".⁴ Yet even he later recognised that there was a real possibility that defeat of the RAF alone could signal "the end of the British resistance".⁵ In reality, there was much more than a "possibility" of a German victory, but for the Prime Minister and those who thought like him precise calculations of probability were no longer relevant. Whatever the balance of forces they were determined to try and survive and, as earlier stated, the fact that such as Halifax and Chamberlain also saw no alternative to this prevented a split in the Cabinet which enabled an effective and determined lead to be given to the country at large.

¹Cab 84/2, JP (40)61, 17th June. Air Commodore Slessor, of the Joint Planning Sub-Committee "suggested that the time had come when a nucleus staff representing essential Government Departments and Services should be sent to Canada to organise and plan for the next phase of the war. In the course of the next few days we might in the United Kingdom become closely involved in operations when planning would be difficult".

²Prem 4/43B/1, p.262, 24th June. Churchill to Roosevelt.

³Chamberlain Diary, 12th June. NC 2/24a.

⁴Prem 4/43B/1, 16th June. Churchill to Dominion Prime Ministers.

⁵Churchill.p. 283.

The determination to fight out the summer of 1940 was clearly not based upon precise calculation of the ability to succeed, but upon a belief that the fruits of survival were better than those of immediate peace, and that those of a failed attempt to stave off the Germans were no worse. There were, however, elements in the equation of survival that appeared most critical. The Chiefs of Staff wrote on 26 May that Britain's survival would "depend primarily on whether our fighter defences will be able to reduce the scale of attack to reasonable bounds".¹ This was deemed as "the crux of the matter"² and in these Chiefs of Staff's conclusions on Britain's chances of "continuing the war alone", seven of the eleven paragraphs dealt with the air issue. Although the centrality of the RAF for the military fate of Britain is clearly recognised,³ what has not so far been fully appreciated is its importance for the whole of the Government's policy towards Germany.

On 27 May, Churchill initiated a discussion in Cabinet on the figures for the relative air strengths of Germany and Britain, as described in the Chiefs of Staff's paper "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality" two days previously. This had estimated that the Germans possessed an advantage of about four to one in aircraft numbers, but the Prime Minister "did not believe the ratio was anything like so great ..."⁴ He maintained that "the odds against us were only 2½ to 1", therefore as "our airmen were shooting down 3 to 1, the balance was on our side". This was no mere academic point, and was not only of significance to the success of the policy of wait and see. In the Prime Minister's view "Our whole policy might depend on our assessment of the German air strength". Churchill did not feel that the RAF needed a numerical superiority because the

¹Gilbert, p.607, *Churchill to Lothian, 25th June.*

²Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May, "British Strategy in the Near Future".

³Bell, p.50; Butler, p.211.

⁴Cab 65/13, WM(40)141, 27th May.

quality of machines and pilots, and the facts that they would be over home territory and aided by radar, were factors to the British advantage. What mattered was that the relative position would allow a reasonable chance of survival. The importance of the Prime Minister's contention about the air figures, i.e. that Britain's prospects of survival were not as bad as many thought, lies in the fact that the debate was carried out during the days when the Government's policy during the war was being decided. On 27 May, the Foreign Secretary said that he was "prepared to take the risk" of fighting on if Britain's independence was at stake, and it is in the context of the proportions of this "risk" that the air figure debate needs to be placed. The Prime Minister's concern over the figures for aircraft numbers did not affect the military position (whatever the juggling with figures, the number of machines was still the same) and, as they were not for publication, presumably there was no propaganda value to be gained. Therefore it must be concluded that, as well as a desire for strict accuracy (although this was not always one of the main characteristics of the Prime Minister's speeches), Churchill was trying to influence those who were aware of the figures, and most likely the Foreign Secretary in particular. What Churchill depended upon was that there should be "reasonable hopes"¹ of Britain's survival. As he said on 8 June, "we could continue the struggle with good hopes of ultimate victory, provided we ensured that our fighter defences in this country were not impaired: but if we cast away our defence the war would be lost ..."², and it was by no means clear that such hopes could be held out. T. Elmhirst, Deputy Director, Intelligence Section, of the Air Ministry, wrote at the end of May 1940, "The result was that the

¹ Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.

Terms of reference for the Chiefs of Staff.

² Cab 69/1, DO(40) 14th Meeting, 8th June. Churchill's remark.

build-up of the RAF had been delayed time and again and the country was now in a position, or so it looked to me, that God only could stave off defeat unless the Germans somehow defeated themselves".¹

Despite the apprehensions about how the RAF would perform, the first crucial test of its ability to protect the country was performed over Dunkirk, with its relative success being one of the few encouraging portents of the time. On 1 June, the Prime Minister reported to Cabinet that this "first real trial of strength between the British and German Air Forces", had been "a signal victory ... which gave cause for high hopes of our successes in the future".² He repeated this theme three days later to the House of Commons:

"When we consider how much greater would be our advantage in defending the air above this island against an overseas attack, I must say that I find in these facts a sure basis upon which practical and reassuring thoughts may rest".³

The fact that the RAF was able to prevent the Luftwaffe destroying the soldiers trapped at Dunkirk proved a substantial morale boost. After outlining the advantages Britain possessed after this "victory",⁴ in a telegram to the Canadian Prime Minister Churchill concluded:

"I therefore feel solid confidence in British ability to continue the war, defend the Island and Empire, and maintain the blockade".⁵

This, although doubtless something of an exaggeration of the confidence generally felt, was an accurate assessment of the focus of British policy-makers during this period. They aimed to "defend the

¹*Elmhirst Papers. ELMT 6/3. Autobiography.*

²*Cab 65/7, WM(40)151, 1st June.*

³*Hansard, Vol.361, Column 791-2, 4th June.*

⁴*Dalton Diary, 4th June. Part 1/22.*

⁵*FO 800/310, 5th June. Churchill to Mackenzie King.*

Island and Empire", with a confidence, if not born of the estimation of future success in the air, then one at least substantially influenced by it. The importance of the RAF was not just that it should survive, but that before this could be put to the test, there should be confident expectation that it could survive. It was in this sense that the Prime Minister viewed the aircraft figures supplied by the Chiefs of Staff. The issue at stake was Churchill's ability to persuade his Government colleagues that, because there was a good chance of a successful outcome of the coming supreme trial, there was no point in even considering doing anything but facing this trial. Yet, as already stated, by making this the ultimate test Churchill faced the collapse of his whole policy if this test were to be failed.

The confidence of British survival was a crucial factor in the determination of the Government and people to attempt this survival, and it was a signal achievement of the new Prime Minister that there was no appreciable or lasting collapse of morale. The crucial importance of this rather nebulous concept of "morale" was noted by the Chiefs of Staff when they concluded their paper "British Strategy in the Near Future" by stating that:

"Germany has most of the cards; but the real test is whether the morale of our fighting personnel and civil population will counter balance the numerical and material advantages which Germany enjoys. We believe it will".¹

This was indeed a central issue, and one which was not always regarded with the same confidence shown above. Two days later, Clement Attlee warned the Cabinet that "... when the public realised the true position (i.e. the military position) they would sustain a

¹*Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.*

severe shock", concluding that the Government "would have to make a great effort to maintain their morale".¹ In justifying Attlee's concern, several pieces of information can be referred to. Lord Sankey noted on 29 May the "great public anxiety and depression over the war" as the BEF was "encircled", and a few days later was even more pessimistic due to the "Terrible news of our defeat and evacuation at Dunkerque".² There were also those who were so alarmed at the likelihood of a successful German invasion that they planned to send items of value to Canada. Kenneth Clark's proposal to ship out the National Gallery's paintings,³ refused by Churchill, was perhaps understandable; the fact that the Commander in Chief of Home Forces, General Ironside, carried out such an evacuation of his diaries to Canada is of greater import. Perhaps the least that can be said is that it betrayed a singular lack of nerve in the face of the expected attack⁴ which might have been serious for the defence of the country. It has been common to criticise the French Generals for their lack of fight and attitude of resignation in the face of the German advance; yet, in the light of the above evidence of Ironside's morale at this time, perhaps some senior British officers would have experienced a similar loss of nerve. Clearly it would be wrong to suggest that the morale of the army was in immediate danger of cracking, but it was not only among the services that the strain of the times was felt. Harold Nicolson, after a conversation with Maurice Hutchinson about "defeatists in the House", was moved to confide in his diary that "there are a lot of weak knees in the mother of Parlia-

¹Cab 65/13, WM(40)145, 28th May.

²Sankey Diary, 29th May & 1st June. The fact that the estimate formed in the second entry was very rare is a tribute to the Government's management of the news and of its resolute pushing of an alternative line. *Mss Eng Hist.* e 293.

³Gilbert, p.469, Colville Diary, 1st June.

⁴Ironside Diary, 7th June. "I think I shall get my diaries and send them over to Canada. There is no use their remaining in Higham to be overrun". They were sent on 12th June .p.356.

ments".¹ This was confirmed by Chamberlain, who noted on 12 June that "K.W. [Kingsley Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer] thinks further disasters might make the Gov'ts position precarious".²

It does seem, however, despite some doubts in June, that "the peak of apprehension passed" once it was clear that the BEF was to be rescued.³ The reasons for this are many, and the roles of Churchill and the other members of the Government were significant. As the BBC Home Board reported on 31 May, if there was to be no collapse of morale, there was "need for anti-defeatist talks", not just by members of the Government but by other opinion leaders as well. The Government for its part was very well aware of the problems that a loss of confidence by the population at large posed, especially as such a situation unfolded in France. During June 1940 the Home Intelligence Committee of the Ministry of Information expressed its concern over the state of the public mind. In their view the "public are ready and determined to follow the Prime Minister if he gives the word, but if that word is not given there are signs that morale may change rapidly for the worst". With determination felt to be so brittle, it was thought that unless there was constant back-stiffening "it is certain that a defeatist attitude will gain ground".⁴ While it is true that the Ministry's staff at Senate House were not always in the greatest sympathy with the "common people", there was much in their concern about the state of flux of opinion. The most dangerous factor which could have tipped this somewhat precarious balance being the final recognition of defeat by France, a danger which the Government strove to divert. On 17 June Churchill broadcast to try and diminish the affect of France's certain capitulation:

¹Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 6th June.

²Chamberlain Diary, 11th June. NC 2/24a.

³Balfour, p.186. Quoting Mass Observation.

⁴INF 1/264, 17th June, "Public Opinion on the present crisis".

"What has happened in France makes no difference to our actions and purpose. We have become the sole champions now in arms to defend the world cause. We shall do our best to be worthy of this honour. We shall defend our Island home, and with the British Empire we shall fight on unconquerable until the curse of Hitler is lifted from the brows of mankind".

He ended this exhortation with an idea which was not only a refrain of his, but an important psychological foundation to a nation which had not been invaded for nearly nine hundred years: "We are sure that in the end all will come right".¹ When the French armistice was signed, there was not that surge of defeatism which had been feared, as the Home Intelligence Committee commented with relief "The effect of the French "capitulation" has in no way minimised the prevailing determination to "fight to the finish".² However, they pointed to another difficulty, as "there are signs of increasing doubt that we shall now be able to obtain "absolute victory"." As has been shown earlier, it was not just among those outside Government that there were grave questions about what would result from successful resistance that summer. This theme was returned to the following day by the Committee planning the domestic morale campaign. "The chief weakness of home morale is a feeling that although we may manage to hold out for a time, we cannot hope to win". In order to counter this, "Our chief aim must, therefore, be to give people a reasonable assurance of ultimate victory. The line should be: a German invasion is doomed to failure",³ and the stressing of increasing equipment, Dominion co-operation and the effectiveness of the Blockade

¹Gilbert, p.566. Broadcast 17th June.

²INF 1/264, 24th June, "Public Opinion on the present crisis".

³INF 1/250, 25th June, Report of Planning Committee on a Home Morale Campaign.

as reasons for such a "reasonable assurance". The reason for concern over this feeling was not so much that it would lead to a breaking of morale in the face of invasion, but rather that there would be a growing call to end an unwinnable conflict. The above report of the Home Morale Campaign committee continued to state that there "is the feeling, not widely expressed but of considerable importance, that a negotiated peace with Germany would be preferable to a prolongation of the war". The preferred counter to this being to "show that until we have conquered Germany any truce would be equivalent to surrender".¹

In order to bolster domestic morale, the Ministry of Information used popular speakers such as J.B. Priestley to broadcast regularly on the radio, and persuaded ex-pacifists like Captin Mumford to say "In helping to defend our country I am defending all that Dick Shepherd held sacred".² They also planned a major campaign of their own. This had its genesis on 4 June when "The Director General [of the Ministry of Information] asked whether it was thought that the Ministry should now begin to stir up the people's more primitive instincts". It was agreed that "we should now pay attention to stirring up people's anger".³ On 17 June the "Anger" Campaign was relayed to the BBC. They were instructed to "heighten the intensity of the personal anger felt by the individual British citizens against the German people and Germany - as a factor in increasing war effort and preparing the British public for every emergency". With Germany to be characterised as "the perpetual trouble-making BULLY OF THE WORLD", and - echoing the Great War - as "The Mad Dog of Europe". As well as slandering the German nation and people, there were injunctions to make these attacks more

¹Reith had not been allowed to include the last phrase in his report on propaganda policy the previous January.

²Walter Monckton Papers, June 1940. Dep. Monckton Trustees 8.

³MacLaine, p.142, 4th June. Policy Committee..

personal. "Likewise we should always label German leaders "Hitler - the Arch Gangster", "Bully Goering" ... It is surely high time the BBC ceased to refer to the dictators as Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini".¹ These attempts to create by propaganda what was seen to be lacking in the population's "correct" feelings towards the war were, despite the effort expended on them, not nearly as important for morale as were the speeches and leadership of the Prime Minister. His 17 June broadcast about the irrelevance of the French defeat has already been noted, and many other speeches of this period have rightly taken their place among the greatest pieces of political oratory in history. Martin Gilbert has summarised Churchill's achievement in this regard in the following way:

"Yet by his own determination, by the support of his War Cabinet colleagues and senior Service advisers, by the final approval of the House of Commons, Britain had avoided that collapse of morale and division of counsel that had so hastened the fall of France".²

Lord Sankey's summing up was more succinct; "Churchill is worth an army".³

When analysing the nature of the morale of the British people as the war turned against them, it was not the concern over defeatism that ought mainly to occupy the attention - indeed, in such a deplorable military position it would have been strange had this not occurred - but rather the widespread resolution to carry on the conflict. Sir Alec Cadogan gave vent to this deep determination on 15 June:

"Everything awful, but "come the three corners of the world and we will shock them"! We'll fight like cats - or die -

¹BBC(WAC) R34/726, 17th June.

²Gilbert, p.644.

³Sankey Diary, 4th June. *Mss Eng Hist.* e 293.

rather than submit to Hitler. US looks pretty useless.

Well, we must die without them".¹

It is really only from this period that the idea of "Hitler" took on its diabolical connotations and the all-or-nothing attitude, partly romantic, partly utter desperation, became the political norm. The clarity with which the stark choice facing Britain was seen was shown by General Ironside, who, in an "exhortation for all senior officers" warned about the "false theory" of "economic warfare without fighting" and then continued: "We are fighting for all we hold dear, liberty and the right to live as we wish to live, and if we do not fight we shall certainly lose the privileges we have enjoyed and developed so long".²

The determination to make the forthcoming test the ultimate one, and to give everything to the winning of that test, was shared in the newspapers of the time. In a leader article, entitled "Floating Fortress", the Evening Standard wrote on 17 June that "This people moves into the Front Line. Our task, now, therefore is clear and simple. It is transform this country into a single fortress". It continued "We do not need to repeat that Britain will carry the struggle on to the end ... If the last fortress holds, mankind is saved. Remember the answer of Leonidas. "The enemy are near us", he was told. "And we are near the enemy", he replied".³ The defeat

¹Cadogan Diary, 15th June. ACAD 1/9.

²Ironside Diary, 8th June. The fact that Ironside had decided to evacuate his diaries the day before adds a brittle edge to the strength of his resolve. p.358.

³Evening Standard, 17th June. Similar ideas were expressed elsewhere in humorous form. For example, the comment "We are in the final now and it's on home ground". David Low expressed this determination on 6th June when he depicted Goering reading Churchill's, "We shall fight ..." speech to Hitler and commenting "We have gone too far Adolf. Der British have declared war". The fact that this was not produced until June shows Low's view of Britain's earlier efforts. Evening Standard, 6th June.

of France was presented as that alone; a defeat of the French, not of the Allies. The test of the British was still to come. This successful differentiation of the fate of and fortunes of the two allies. was crucial in preventing too great a collapse of British morale.

Of the many factors which helped to carry both Government and people through the disasters of May and June 1940, as well as those already mentioned, there were generally held attitudes which, although hard to quantify, were of the utmost significance. The first of these was a feeling that Britain and the British armed forces had not been defeated in France. Instead they had withdrawn to stronger positions in order to fight again. The fact that absolute defeat had seemed very likely and was then avoided, helped to give the country the courage of a man who, having got used to cheating death, believes himself immortal. The fact that disaster very nearly had occurred was the result of the fact that "they" had not really been trying. Whether "they" were the "guilty Men" of Munich, or the man-in-the-street who persisted in not feeling angry about the Germans in a personal sense, depended upon an individual's social or political outlook. Where strength was gained from this was that now both "we" and "they" seem to be putting all-out effort into the war. If the Germans had not been able to destroy Britain when she was hardly trying, then they ought to watch out now she meant business! "Defeat" had indeed been "turned to victory", and as the Daily Telegraph outlined on 1 June:

"Since there is more joy in a fear dismissed than in a hope fulfilled, the nation may not only feel pride but take encouragement from this heroic retreat. The story of it fortifies the soul, and nerves the nation to emulate that power to suffer and be strong which its

fighting men have so splendidly displayed".¹

Yet the morale boost provided by such an event could of its very nature be only a relatively short-lived one. While Sir Henry Channon recorded the sense of "relief to the whole country which is proud of its troops" on 2 June, he continued realistically "but nonetheless we are in an appalling position".² The effect of such reflections, had they been widespread, would have been fatal to the country's will to resist. Channon was caused to wonder "is this really the end of England? Are we witnessing, as for so long I have feared, the decline, the decay and perhaps the extinction of this great island people". It was good for Churchill that not too many other people wondered likewise. By 10 June, however, even Channon noted that "my deep gloom had lifted" and was caught up in the romantic mood of the time, "every day is a document, every hour history".³

In order to sustain the uplift caused by Dunkirk, other reasons for hope were required. One of these, as already mentioned, was that Britain was now engaging in a "Total War". When General Ironside wrote in his diary that "we have wasted eight months of previous time not realising that the war was serious",⁴ he was reflecting an attitude which many felt to be true even if, unlike him, they did not know for certain. Now, however, things were seen to be different. If the public did not know that from 29 May "purchases abroad which would make an immediate contribution to defence needs should not be held up on exchange grounds",⁵ they were well aware that to the "task of forging the munitions for a "total war" on land and in the air our nation is

¹*Daily Telegraph*, 1st June. Main headline and leading article.

²*Channon Diary*, 2nd June.p.255.

³*Channon Diary*, 20th June.p.258.

⁴*Ironside Diary*, 10th June. His epitaph on Chamberlain's war administration is devastating yet accurate. p.361.

⁵*Cab 72/3*, EP (M)(40) 13th Meeting, 29th May.

now beginning to bend with might and main".¹ The obvious stepping up of war effort was of crucial importance in providing both an explanation of past failure and a solid reason for hope about the future.

Another attitude of great importance in preventing the collapse of morale which had so hastened the end of fighting in France, was the ill-defined, but persistent, hope that things would somehow work out in the end. The most vigorous advocate of this theme was the Prime Minister himself. On 4 June he wrote to the King that "Better days will come - though not yet" and to Lord Baldwin, "We are going through very hard times and I expect worse to come: but I feel quite sure better days will come", concluding in a note of sinister reflection, "though whether we shall live to see them is more doubtful".²

Churchill's notes for the Secret Session of Parliament also contain this theme: "I do not see why we should not find our way through this time, as we did last".³ This allusion to the crises of the Great War, which despite frequent gloomy predictions had been weathered successfully, helped to add yet another facet to the argument that to give up the struggle would be pointless.

It is to Churchill's great credit that after the end of May 1940 he was able to prevent any debate at ministerial level about whether Britain should fight on. Indeed such was the extent of the coalition around the Prime Minister's point of view that many, such as Lloyd George, who had earlier advocated negotiations, now adopted a "firmer"⁴ position. While anyone seeming to advocate peace was regarded with something approaching contempt. When Ralph Glyn MP said to Harold Nicolson, "I happen to know that the Germans would offer us very generous terms", the latter's reaction to this "most frightful

¹*Daily Telegraph*, leading article, 7th June.

²Gilbert, p.469, 4th June. Letter to Lord Baldwin.

³Gilbert, p.578-9.

⁴*Chamberlain Diary*, 1st June. NC 2/24a.

defeatism" was that "people ought to be shot who say that sort of thing".¹

The factors mentioned combined to produce a determined front of unquestioning resistance to Germany. It was one of the most important objectives of Churchill's Government that it should be thought that there was no alternative to fighting on, and an objective admirably achieved. On 16 June Churchill, referring to "British public opinion", commented that:

"At the present juncture all thoughts of coming to terms with the enemy must be dismissed so far as Britain was concerned. We were fighting for our lives and it was vital that we should allow no chink to appear in our armour".²

Because the military gamble on the success of the RAF and of withstanding invasion turned in Britain's favour, there was no apparent chink in the armour of morale. Yet it is clear, and was even more clear at the time, that had further disasters occurred, then fault lines would most likely have opened as they did in France.

One of the other influences on the decision to continue to fight was the persistence of the belief that Germany had a good many problems to face, some of which arose from the structure of Nazi society, and some from the burdens imposed on them by their success. A good deal of attention was paid to these difficulties - real or imagined - with the emphasis ranging from calculation as to how best to inconvenience Germany, to extravagant claims concerning her imminent collapse. As early as 26 May, in the Chiefs of Staff's report on the future of the war, the "effect of a continual denial

¹*Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 16th June.*

²*Cab 65/13, WM(40)168, 16th June.*

of overseas supplies to Germany" was described as widespread food shortages, oil, military equipment and of "an immense unemployment problem" in the industrialised areas of occupied Europe.¹ Despite the pressure of air attacks, which would be "extremely limited for some time" and the opportunities for "sowing the seeds of revolt", Britain's "ability to bring the war to a successful conclusion" depended not on this but "upon full Pan-American economic and financial co-operation".

The Chiefs of Staff's justifiable caution notwithstanding there was, whenever the prospects of Britain continuing the war was discussed, an emphasising of Germany's problems. For example, in the terms of reference by the Prime Minister to the military chiefs, it was "observed that a prolongation of British resistance might be very dangerous for Germany engaged in holding down the greater part of Europe";² or as in a letter to Jan Smutts when Churchill described Germany's holding "all Europe down in a starving condition" as "not an arrangement which can last long".³ The other main form of British hopes concerning German weakness was her economic position. On 27 May, Attlee told Cabinet that the Ministry of Economic Warfare had highlighted Germany's oil position as her economic and military Achilles heel, which "would be causing her grave anxiety by the Autumn, and would be critical by the Spring".⁴ Other shortages were also mentioned at various times, such as tin and rubber, and it is hardly surprising that in such a desperate situation there should be over optimistic estimates of Germany's difficulties, but what is significant is the extent to which these were expected to improve Britain's prospects of survival in the war.

On 11 June, in an assessment of possible reasons for a peace

¹Cab 66/7, WP(40)168, 26th May.

²Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.

³Gilbert, p.603, 26th June.

⁴Cab 65/13, WM(40)141, 27th May.

offer by the Germans, the joint planning sub-committee wrote that one of these could be "economic stress within Germany", caused by growing commodity shortages in the Reich, yet it is not always clear whether such considerations were only seen as encouragement or of more genuine significance in the decision to fight on. Given that economic pressure was almost the only way Britain could damage Germany, and reports that there was "considerable depression" there were fairly frequent,¹ was this ever likely to prove decisive? On occasion, the Prime Minister seemed to suggest that it might be, such as in his speech to the Secret Session of the House of Commons on 20 June when he used "the severities of the winter in Europe" as one of the pieces of supporting evidence for his claim that "If Hitler fails to invade or destroy Britain he has lost the war".² There were even those who put such faith in the reports that "the Nazis are terrified of failing to win the war that same year" that they felt able to use the phrase "the war may be over by Christmas" to describe a German defeat not a victory.³ Perhaps the clearest exposition of the view which rated German difficulties as highly significant was again by Churchill, this time in a telegram to the British High Commissioners in the Dominions, when he wrote:

"If we can hold out for some time, there are a good many factors which may produce a state of affairs where the enemy cannot carry on the war, e.g. effects of our blockade of Germany on economic position there particularly as regards food-stuffs and oils, dissatisfaction and loss of morale in Germany".

¹Halifax Diary, 11th June. "An encouraging secret report from a Military Attache in Berlin gives a picture of considerable depression, in spite of the victories, anxiety over casualties, and great concern about the entry of the United States and a long war. I feel there is solid ground for encouragement here". A7.8.4.

²Gilbert, pp.578-9.

³Gilbert, p.446, 31st May, Colville Diary.

He then continued to list other factors such as aid from the U.S.A., and anti-German reaction in Italy, Russia and the Balkan States.¹ The order of these assets is clearly not indicative of their importance, as the Chiefs of Staff earlier stated that American support was the most crucial factor, yet it is understandable that there should be an exaggeration of Germany's problems. The first reason for this was the long-held view of Nazi Germany as an overstretched society and economy, vulnerable to any economic pressure. To this was added the psychological need to feel that Britain's resistance was proving effective, that she was not sitting supine in the face of German onslaughts. In reality, despite the occasional grasping of straws at moments of crisis, the weaknesses of Germany were considered not as a decisive issue which would win the war, but as a counter argument to those who might suggest that Germany possessed all the advantages. The issue of German weakness was not a reason for the Government continuing to fight, but it did hold out considerable hope of making its survival policy easier to complete.

One of the other assets in Britain's favour when it came to the prospects of holding out against Germany in the long run, although of not too great a value immediately, was the support of the Dominions. On 27 May, the New Zealand Prime Minister telegraphed to Churchill that "We will be with you to the last come what may".² This set the tone of the attitude of all the Dominion Governments, and mention has been made earlier of telegrams from the Prime Ministers of Canada and South Africa who, particularly the former, were concerned with how they could assist Britain. Yet this should not be interpreted merely as support for the known British Government policy of fighting on, but as a support of Churchill's Government come what may. This was stated by

¹ Prem 4/43B/1, No. Z 77. 27th May.

² Prem 4/43B/1, p.338. 27th May.

the New Zealand Prime Minister who, after declaring on 15 June that they "pledge this Dominion to remain with them to the end", continued:

"If on the other hand time should ever come as HM Government in New Zealand pray with all their hearts it never may, when HM Government in United Kingdom should feel themselves compelled to decide that a continuance of hostilities is no longer possible, notwithstanding the proved unreliability of Hitler's (? word - group omitted), then we will stand by HM Government in United Kingdom in that (? event - group omitted) also".¹

The reasons for this were firstly that there was a realistic appreciation of the situation which confronted Britain, and the recognition that a whole range of options were not only available at the time, but in the near future as well. Secondly, there was a reluctance "for a small people living 13,000 miles away to urge 40,000,000 to die when they cannot die with them".² Two days later the Australian Prime Minister, Menzies, wrote "I once more make it clear that the decision of Great Britain to fight on is one which all Australians would make in similar circumstances".³

Valuable though the continued support of the Dominions was, its short-term effect was significant only in that their withdrawal would have seriously impaired British morale. Although active Dominion participation, especially by Canada, was to become more important as the war progressed, it was never in the same order as the contribution eventually provided by the USA; and it is the influence of this latter country that will now be considered.

P.M.H. Bell has written of the Chiefs of Staff's report on

¹FO 800/310 H/IX/154, 15th June.

²FO 800/310 H/IX/155, 15th June. From High Commissioner in New Zealand. Background to Telegram in previous Note.

³Prem 4/43B/1, p.273, 17th June.

"British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality", that they emphasised that American co-operation was essential if the war was to be won, and this became the key to much of British policy and strategy. This theme has been taken up and extended by David Reynolds, who wrote "In the summer of 1940, then, a "special association" with the United States became the principal goal of British policy".¹ Not wishing to diminish the importance of the United States for the future prospects of Britain's victory, it does, however, need to be stated that for the immediate resistance to invasion and for the crucial three months of "Britain alone", the influence of the USA was not the key. What the support of the United States was crucial for was the long-term prospects of Britain's survival. R.G. Casey, one of Lord Lothian's staff wrote, "I believe that USA will come in at some stage. If they do, then the whole scene changes and there is no necessity for ... a conference", adding in ominous afterthought, "If USA doesn't come in at any stage - well"² As the Chiefs of Staff wrote on 12 June, "Without the full economic and financial co-operation of the whole of the American Continent the task might in the event prove too great for the British Empire single-handed";³ It was a "fall-back" position "if we should be beaten down through superior numbers of the enemy's air force",⁴ and for the provision of hope for the population at large. It also offered the only chance that Britain had of actually winning the war. This was not to be achieved by an American Expeditionary Force, or necessarily even by the USA becoming a full belligerent. Instead what was wanted was that she should "give us full economic and financial support, without which we do not think we could continue the war with any chance of success".⁵

¹*Bell*, p.49; *Reynolds*, p.102.

²*Lothian Papers*, 2nd June. GD/17/514.

³*Prem 4/43B/1*, pp.276-8, 16th June.

⁴*Ibid*, Churchill's comment.

⁵*Cab 66/7*, WP(40)168, 26th May.

As Attlee put it, referring to President Roosevelt;

"His assurance that the material resources of his great industrial nation will be placed at the disposal of the Allies makes it inevitable that, however hard the road, the cause of civilisation will in the end prevail".¹

The USA, it was hoped, would act as both the arsenal of democracy and as a vital link in Britain's blockade weapon with which she would bring Germany to her knees. However, this was a long-term hope and was not one which materially affected the success with which an invasion in the summer of 1940 could be repulsed.

United States support could not affect those areas seen as most crucial in May and June 1940. Firstly, when it came to the ability of Britain to survive the expected German onslaught, American assistance, although greatly desired, partly for its symbolic import, was rather marginal in terms of its effect on the forthcoming battle. The Chiefs of Staff, on 25 May, wrote that "We should do our utmost to persuade the United States of America to provide aircraft, particularly fighters, as soon as possible and in large numbers".² Five days earlier Churchill had written that the "most vital need" from the USA was for Curtis P40 fighter aircraft; a letter written after the attempt to obtain old destroyers from Roosevelt had appeared to fail.³ The "immediate and vital requirement" was for these fighter aircraft and destroyers, but despite their reinforcing effect,⁴ it could not be said that the ability to fight the war really depended on this equipment. This is shown by the fact that in the Chiefs of Staff's assessment of

¹Hansard, Vol.361, Column 1166, 11th June.

²Cab 66/7, WP(40)168, 26th May.

³Prem 3/468, 20th May. Churchill to Roosevelt. The Prime Minister's disappointment about the failure of attempts to get aid was shown when he wrote "Although President is our best friend no practical help has been forthcoming from the United States as yet". FO 800/310 H/IX/150, 5th June. Telegram to Mackenzie King.

⁴Cab 66/8, WP(40)203, 13th June. Chiefs of Staff to Lothian.

Britain's ability to hold out against invasion,¹ no mention is made of the necessity of American assistance.

Given that the aid of the United States was not crucial for Britain's ability to survive the onslaught expected during the early summer of 1940, was the hope of this aid central to the decision to attempt to survive? This second issue is of central importance to an understanding of the Churchill Government's position in regard to the future of the war. It has been stated already that the policy being pursued by the Government was one of "wait and see" while they attempted to hold out for three months before evaluating long-term strategy. Therefore, if the assistance of the USA was central to this policy, it would be expected that this would be so during these crucial months. However, neither the type of support desired nor the time-scale expected would have been of value during this immediate crisis. As stated, it was the "full economic and financial support of United States" which was required, and these were not things which would help, in the short-run, the struggle for survival. For the immediate future Britain still had enough currency reserves to buy all that the USA could produce, with financial credit only being necessary later, while the economic support concerned the effective working of the blockade and of shipping assistance.² These were, the above memorandum admitted, for "the further prosecution of the war", and not only was it realised that such assistance would bear fruit only much later on, but it was clear that it might not begin to be given for some time. On 27 May, Chamberlain said "we might not obtain this support in the immediate future".³ Thus United States help was for the long-run only, and not for the immediate crisis. There was some bitterness about the attitude of the United States Administration, Churchill commenting that they

¹ *Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.*

² *Cab 68/8, WP(40)203, 13th June.*

³ *Cab 65/13 WM(40)141, 27th May.*

"had given us practically no help in the war, and now that they saw how great was the danger, their attitude was that they wanted to keep everything which would help us for their own defence".¹ Cadogan's summing up was more terse: "US looks pretty useless. Well, we must die without them".² Nevertheless it was generally appreciated that US support could not make itself felt for some months at least, by which time the immediate issue of the war would have already been decided. Chamberlain made this clear on 12 June when he wrote in his diary: "USA can give no substantial help for many months and all depends on our ability to repel invasion, for if that fails we have no sufficient force to repel and defeat the German army".³ As J.R.M. Butler has written, the first question was: "could the United Kingdom hold out until assistance from the Empire and America made itself felt?"⁴ If Britain "could hold out for some months, aid could probably then be given",⁵ but if survival proved impossible then there would be nobody to give aid to.

Having thus looked at some of the documentary evidence relating to the centrality or otherwise of the United States for British policy during May to June 1940, the following conclusions can be made. Firstly that "a "special association" with the United States" did not become "the principal goal of British policy".⁶ Had this been so, then the failure to achieve this goal during the summer of 1940 would have lead to a collapse of Government policy and to a negotiated settlement. The "principal goal" of the Churchill Government's policy was to continue the fight until it was clear whether Britain could survive or not, and the decision this was based on owed very little to American assistance. Although Sir Henry Channon wrote of Roosevelt on 14 June

¹ *Reynolds*, p.104, 27th May.

² *Cadogan Diary*, 15th June. ACAD 1/9.

³ *Chamberlain Diary*, 12th June. NC 2/24a.

⁴ *Butler*, Vol.II, p.210.

⁵ FO 800/310, 30th May. *Mackenzie King to Churchill*.

⁶ *Reynolds*, p.102.

"If he refuses to come in it would seem that the war must come to an end, and this great Empire will have been defeated and humiliated" and the returning Ambassador from Rome thought that "The attitude of America will be highly important"¹ in deciding Britain's immediate future, there is no evidence that the Prime Minister ever thought along such lines: for all his enthusing about the imminence of United States aid, he refused to let conclusions be drawn from its delay in arriving which would have prejudiced the country's determination to fight on. Britain was not fighting because of immediate hope of assistance from the USA, but to a large extent despite its unhelpful attitude. In the passage quoted above, Cadogan's statement "US looks pretty useless. Well, we must die without them"² does not suggest Roosevelt's support as the key to anything. Oliver Harvey noted that Churchill was determined that the British attitude towards the United States was not "come in and help us because we are at the last gasp", but rather "we are going to fight on whatever happens - even if we lose - are you going to help us or stand aside?"³ This last phrase is a good summing up of the British position as they meditated upon the immediate position left by France's collapse.

Secondly, it can be deduced that the support and encouragement of the United States was crucial in two regards; the attainment of victory and the sustenance of morale, issues which were not wholly unrelated. On 25 May, the Chiefs of Staff had, as already stated, commented that without the "full economic and financial support" of the United States, "we do not think we could continue the war with any chance of success",⁴ that is of winning the war, and on 18 May, when asked by his son how Britain could possibly beat the Germans,

¹Channon Diary, 14th June .p.257-258.; Loraine Diary, 21st June, FO 1011/246.

²Cadogan Diary, 15th June. ACAD 1/9.

³Harvey Diary, 29th May. Add Mss 56396.

⁴Cab 66/7, WP(40)168, 26th May.

Churchill replied "I shall drag the United States in".¹ It was for victory that United States economic and financial support was essential, although it would also make the prospects of survival considerably easier in the long term. The second crucial element is the significance of the USA for sustaining British morale during the long, lonely summer of 1940. David Reynolds has written that Churchill "played on hopes of American help" to "combat" arguments for a compromise peace.² However, this idea needs some qualification. Despite the activities of some at Westminster, the issue of an immediate compromise peace had, by the beginning of June, already been settled. The important issue was what would happen after the Germans had attempted to subdue the country. Hope in the United States was not required to bolster up the wait-and-see policy of the Government, but to combat the feeling that Britain might be able to survive, but could not hope to win. The existence of this sentiment, and official concern over it, has been shown earlier, and it is most likely that Churchill's "exaggeratedly optimistic view of the USA" was not so much to "stop talk of peacemaking"³ in the immediate future, but to ensure against the rise of the feeling that Britain was fighting merely for better terms of peace. At one level she was fighting for exactly this, but Churchill's concern was that if there was a chance of victory - and he believed the USA held out exactly this chance - there should be a united national attempt to achieve it.

Britain fought on in the summer of 1940, not because of American assistance but despite the fact that it was largely unforthcoming and with the hope of winning such assistance in the future. At the end of May Churchill held out the prospect of aid from the USA to try and encourage the French to continue in the war,⁴ an attempt which proved

¹Gilbert, p.358, 18th May, to his son, Randolph.

²Reynolds, pp.102 & 106.

³Reynolds, p.106.

⁴Cab 65/13, WM (40)145, Telegram to Paris No.235 DIPP, 28th May.

unsuccessful because it was irrelevant to the real needs of France. In a somewhat similar way, American help was not a sufficiently large factor to encourage the British to fight their battle. It was certainly the light at the end of the tunnel, but one which, instead of illuminating, only highlighted the present darkness of isolation which had to be endured in heading through that tunnel. US support was undoubtedly crucial to the "final issue" of defeating Germany, but this "final issue will hang at first on our ability to withstand the great effort which the enemy is likely to make against Great Britain in the immediate future".¹ The "key to much of British policy and strategy",² if not to all of it, was thus the determination to fight the battle of Britain, whatever form this might have taken, and the central feature of this was "the air battles" over England, not United States support.³

The adoption of the wait-and-see policy meant that for the immediate future all thoughts of peace were postponed. It was military events, beginning with the evacuation of the BEF, which were now important, not the fate of France or prospects for reaching agreement with Germany. Even Lord Halifax agreed that such things did not "really matter in comparison to the military events",⁴ events which at last appeared to be going in Britain's favour on the beaches and in the air above Dunkirk.⁵ The Prime Minister spoke for the whole country when he wrote at the end of June to Lord Lothian in Washington: "What really matters is whether Hitler is master of Britain in three months or not. I think not. But it is a matter which cannot be argued beforehand".⁶

¹Cab 66/8, WP(40)203, 13th June.

²Prem 4/43B/1, p.273, 17th June.

³Prem 3/468, pp.194-5, 20th May. Churchill to Roosevelt.

⁴Halifax Diary, 27th May. A7.8.4.

⁵Halifax Diary, 28th May. A7.8.4 and Dawson Diary, 30th May. Mss Dawson 44, show the affect of Dunkirk on the Foreign Secretary's morale.

⁶Gilbert, p.607, 28th June.

The month of May 1940 saw one of the most dramatic transformations of war aims in British history. It started with Chamberlain's "phoney war" search for a guaranteed peace and European stability and it ended, not with the "Churchillian" myth of "victory at all costs", but with the overriding aim of earning a peace which left intact Britain's independence of action and strategic integrity.

CHAPTER 9

JULY 1940: ANTICIPATION OF A PEACE OFFER

Having decided that they would postpone decisions about whether to seek peace with Germany until after it had become clear whether Britain was going to be able to survive the onslaught of the Luftwaffe, the Government had then to determine how it would react to any peace offer that was made in the intervening period. This was a matter of some urgency as there was a generally held expectation that Hitler would try to bring the war in the West to a close before any attempt at an invasion of the British Isles. The discussions relating to this subject are of importance in revealing Government attitudes towards a negotiated settlement in the new war situation. Under particular consideration was the timing of a peace, the medium through which peace was offered, the terms that were put forward and the supporting guarantees. It was, even in June and July 1940, the lack of acceptable terms and guarantees rather than a refusal to accept any agreement which was the main reason why peace was not concluded. As the Prime Minister himself stated in Cabinet on 17 May: "If Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the terms of the restoration of German colonies and overlordship of central Europe, that was one thing. But it was quite unlikely that he would make such an offer".¹

From the middle of June, expectations of an imminent peace offer by Hitler were widely held by many, both within the Government and outside it. On 16 June, Chamberlain wrote in his diary that:

"... it is announced that Hitler will speak tomorrow
when I anticipate that he will make a peace offer,
certainly to France, possibly, not probably to us

¹*Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.*

indicating that it is the last chance. Looks like another difficult weekend".¹

This idea was expressed the same day by the Dominion High Commissioners who, according to Lord Halifax:

"... had an idea that if and when Hitler made a peace offer this would take one of two forms. It would either be such as could permit no discussion or it might be such as might appear on its face reasonable, but in regard to which no-one would expect any undertakings to be kept".²

On 14 June, both Chamberlain and the Dominion Commissioners considered peace proposals as possibilities. A day later, in a telegram otherwise virtually identical to the theme of the above entry in Halifax's diary, the Australian Prime Minister concurred when he wrote "I feel that the question of probable attitude of the German Government after Hitler's entry into Paris requires urgent attention".³ The Chiefs of Staff agreed with this, writing on 11 June that "Following a French collapse" Germany might decide "that it would pay her better (i.e. rather than to attempt invasion) to offer us peace terms, possibly under the threat of Italian intervention if that had not already occurred". Their main anxiety in such an event being the effect a refusal of "specious" terms would have on American willingness to support Britain".⁴

By 26 June, John Colville thought "a peace offensive is almost certain unless it has dawned on Hitler that we shall not stop fighting until we have won",⁵ and the following day Harold Nicolson clearly thought that the expected offer of peace had arrived. "We

¹Chamberlain Diary, 14th June. NC 2/24a.

²Halifax Diary, 14th June. A7.8.4.

³FO 800/310, H/IX/156, 15th June.

⁴Cab 66/8, WP(40)201, 11th June.

⁵Colville Diary, 21st June, Gilbert, p.602.

go back together to the Ministry [of Information, he was accompanied by Duff Cooper, the Minister] and there in the duty room we find a flash to the effect that Hitler is going to offer us sensationally generous terms" was how Nicolson recorded it in his diary, adding somewhat ominously "I doubt whether our opinion is strong enough to resist this temptation".¹ This turned out to be a false alarm, as did one on 19 July when the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Lothian, claimed that he could obtain the German terms² if the Government so desired.

The most detailed discussion of a possible peace offer took place as early as 11 June, when the likelihood of one being made was regarded as much less than it was later in the month. This was in the Joint Planning Sub-Committee, as one of their "reviews of British strategy in the event of a French collapse".³ After opening with the statement that "We have no information to suggest that the Germans are contemplating a peace offer in the near future", they added that nevertheless "the following considerations amongst them might induce them to offer peace". These considerations were outlined as "uncertainty" that invasion or air attack "would succeed: should it fail the shock on an overstrained people might be very serious"; "Fear that American intervention would lead to a long drawn out war" worsened by having to face Russia as well; "Economic stress within Germany", the knowledge that Britain's resources "are likely to expand greatly during 1941"; and the fear that Italy "will become a military liability".⁴ For the reasons mentioned, it was held that Germany might desire to end the war that summer, therefore it was clearly necessary

¹*Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 27th June.*

²FO 371/24408 c8015/89/18, 19th July.

³Cab 84/15, JP(40)235, 11th June.

⁴*Ibid*; They also added: "The influence of Mussolini, who must realise that the complete destruction of British power cannot be to Italy's advantage in the long run, might be thrown into the scales in favour of a compromise settlement", which reflects how deeply held this belief of Italy's interests still was.

for the Government to determine what its responses to any such offer should be.

Outside the Government there were those whose expectation of a peace offer was a source of hope, such as the British Union, who advocated "the immediate making of peace",¹ and the National Peace Council, who pressed for "a more detailed and constructive statement of peace aims by the Government".² Yet this would have been a very different sort of peace offer from those contemplated earlier in the year. Lord Noel Buxton was clear on this point when he wrote to Lloyd George on 7 June about "war aims, and the possibilities of negotiation, as they appeared before total war began". To Noel Buxton's mind; "The new situation has shattered all that. But we may be confronted with a different kind of peace offensive, perhaps at short notice".³ At this time Lloyd George became the centre, or more accurately several people tried to make him the centre, of a group of up to thirty MP's and several Peers who wanted him to present to Churchill their opinion that "there is a possibility - however remote - that some utterances may be made [by Hitler] which could form the start of negotiations". This group, which really coalesced around the Labour MP Richard Stokes, wanted Lloyd George to act because "It would be disastrous ... if such an opportunity were destroyed as it undoubtedly would be by a rhetorically scornful speech by the Prime Minister or the ill-advised remarks which the Minister of Information is inclined to make".⁴ The First World War Prime Minister, although he considered "the question of possible negotiation in the future",⁵ was more concerned at that time with Britain's military survival. Yet

¹*Beaverbrook Papers, Bbk d/405, 5th June. Memo on British Union by Lord Birkett*

²*National Peace Council, Executive Committee Minutes, 10th June, NPC 2/5.*

³*Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 15, 7th June. Letter from Lord Noel Buxton.*

⁴*Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 19, 25th June. R. Stokes to Lloyd George.*

⁵*Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/Box 15, 7th June. Letter from Lord Noel Buxton.*

despite this, the allegations that he secretly desired to be Britain's Petain were commonplace,¹ even though he refused to let himself become a figure-head for Stokes' colleagues.

On 12 July the Dominions Secretary sent a circular telegram to the Dominion Prime Ministers stating that they had "been considering possibility that Herr Hitler may shortly launch plan for a European, if not worldwide economic conference ..." and asking for their opinions. The most interesting of the replies he received was from Jan Smutts who, on 17 July, as he had so often done over the preceding months, summed up concisely the situation facing Britain. "It is most probable" he wrote, "that Hitler will start a peace offensive at an early date. This may be either for a conference or some other form of peace propaganda. It may come before or after an attack on Britain".² Such an assessment, however accurate, was hardly helpful in guiding the Government's thoughts.

Despite the general expectations that there would be a peace offer by Hitler, there was little agreement over the form it would take. Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister, thought that they would be either "impossible of acceptance" or would "on face value appear comparatively reasonable and designed to glorify Hitler as a magnanimous victor who has a real desire for a peaceful world".³ The Joint Planning Staff thought that Menzies' second alternative was more likely, writing that "any offer would almost certainly be designed to make an insidious appeal" to both American and Dominion opinion as well as to "the love of peace which remains deeply rooted in the United Kingdom". Therefore, "specious disarmament proposals" would be "a prominent feature" combined with an attempt to "leave our prestige and industrial interests - possibly even our military position - superficially

¹*Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 27th June, "He (Duff Cooper) says that Lloyd George is a dangerous man and is working for a Petain peace".*

²*Cab 66/9, WP(40)270, 19th July.*

³*FO 800/310, H/IX/156, 16th June.*

unimpaired". Before continuing to outline possible terms, the Joint Planners stressed the need to differentiate "between the retention of a place like Malta, which can never be more than a question of prestige, and the ability to reimpose a blockade of Germany, which is a strategic necessity". The need to decide which were primary and which were secondary requisites clearly emphasised the restrictions the defeat of the French had imposed upon British thinking about the result of the war. In outlining terms, the Joint Planners preoccupation was that Germany would try to make any "peace offer as palatable as possible". In their opinion, therefore, terms which would "satisfy German requirements", and might be offered were: "General disarmament in Europe" with naval and air bases dismantled, and Britain being allowed to keep her battlefleet in the Far East; return of Germany's pre-1914 colonies; an independent Poland and a Czech State ("This would be a sop to British opinion, but would in no way weaken German dominance in Eastern Europe"); evacuation by German troops of Norway, France and Belgium; plebiscites "which the Germans would hope to rig" in Denmark and the "lower Rhine basin"; general lowering of tariffs and the fostering of trade; and finally "the peace treaty to be guaranteed by, or at least negotiated under the auspices of, America".¹

In most regards, apart from the naval arrangements, the terms postulated by the Joint Planners were similar to those which it was felt would have been acceptable to the Chamberlain Government the previous October. However, despite the expectation of a peace offer, which now appears to be unrealistically optimistic, there were no great hopes of a settlement resulting. There were reports from embassies abroad that variously Chamberlain, Simon, Hoare and the Duke

¹ *Cab 84/15, JP(40)235, 11th June.*

of Windsor were interested in peace,¹ but this was merely German-inspired propaganda. The general British reaction to the idea of peace terms - even those as extravagantly lenient as those postulated by the Joint Planners - was that there was still no guarantee of the German leaders keeping to any agreement. Although both the Dominion High Commissioners and Australian Prime Minister Menzies in previously mentioned extracts² hoped to gain the diplomatic support of the United States to guarantee any agreement, the Joint Planners viewed the matter in more realistic terms.

"No faith could be placed in the word of the German leaders. The only possible guarantee of peace would be a military sanction, which the United States alone could supply - and which she is at present quite incapable of supplying".³

Their conclusion was therefore pessimistic; peace on the most generous of possible terms would merely be signing our own death warrant. If any settlement led to a severe diminution of "our naval and air strength vis-a-vis Germany", which was crucial to Britain's ability to survive any future conflict, there could be no other conclusion.

Despite the belief that terms might be proposed by the Germans which would appear to allow both Britain and France to escape from the worst of their predicament, Lord Halifax on 14 June thought it "almost inconceivable" that Hitler wanted a settlement, and viewed it as "at

¹FO 371/24406, 22nd June. Telegrams from Belgrade c7377/89/18 and 30th June from Madrid c7542/89/18. The same file contains a telegram of 25th June from Sweden which said "a high official in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs ... said that they could not negotiate with Mr Churchill, Mr Eden or Mr Cooper but would be ready to negotiate with your lordship [Halifax]", which was a neat twist on the British refusal to deal with Hitler.

²FO 800/310, H/IX/156, 15th and 16th June.

³Cab 84/15, JP(40)235, 11th June.

present a totally unreal hypothesis".¹ Even the Joint Planners could "conceive of no peace offer which Germany might make in the near future" which could have been acceptable before it had been ascertained whether Britain would be able to hold off invasion and air attack.² It was conclusions such as this which lay at the heart of the "wait-and-see" nature of British policy. General Smutts was as ever sceptical of any peace moves. He wrote on 17 July "We have been surprised at every stage of the war and should now take every precaution not to be surprised into a fatal peace", and advocated "ridicule" in advance of any offer in order to "take ... the sting out of it".³ This sentiment, that any "peace" move by Hitler would be totally insincere, was expressed in a Foreign Office summary of peace feelers in the following way;

"It looks as though Germany wishes to sound the ground for peace talks before she launches any offensive against us. Previous experience suggests that such German moves are to be distrusted as attempts to spy out the land here and to divide British opinion, as French opinion was so successfully divided".⁴

A Hitler peace offer, therefore, was viewed not in terms of the opportunity it presented, but as to how much of a threat it posed to British morale. Any other interpretation was, in Halifax's words, almost inconceivable.

During the months of June and July there were, however, two attempts to investigate the possibilities of peace, and the Government's reactions show their newly adopted position in regard to a negotiated settlement.

¹FO 800/310, H/IX/156, 15th and 16th June.

²Cab 84/15, JP(40)235, 11th June.

³Cab 66/9, WP(40)270, 19th July.

⁴FO 371/24407, 16th July, p.92, by J.K. Roberts.

The first raising of the subject of a general negotiated peace after the end of May was in the attempts of the Vatican to bring the two sides together in the wake of France's impending withdrawal from the war. On 17 June the British Minister in Berne,¹ Mr Kelly, received a message from the Papal Nuncio expressing the "personal hope that His Majesty's Government ... would not refuse to negotiate as 'Hitler is not eternal'".² The following day the Nuncio's "personal hope" was repeated, stating that "if Great Britain were now to express her readiness to participate in general peace conference, Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini would agree ..." These low-level probings by the Nuncio gain their importance not from the fact that they took place, but because the second message also said "that (the) Vatican will be glad to receive any messages which you may wish to send".³ It seems probable that the Papal Nuncio was attempting to prepare the ground for mediation by the Pope - whether on his own initiative or not is unclear - and a few days later, before any reply to the previous messages had been sent, this process went a stage further. On 21 June, the Nuncio told Mr Kelly that "various foreign colleagues" had suggested to him that "Vatican or other third Power" ought to "sound His Majesty's Government ... as to possibility of a compromise", a line of approach which the Nuncio had recommended that the Vatican consider. To this clear offer of the possibility of Vatican mediation, Kelly replied that "I had no reason to believe that His Majesty's Government were thinking of any compromise or were interested in Herr Hitler's views", because the German leader's "character made treaties of the old type out of date".⁴

The resolute stance taken by the Minister in Berne was backed by

¹Normal channels of communication being interrupted by Italy's entry into the war.

²FO 408/70 No.225 DIPP, 17th June. Kelly to Halifax.

³FO 408/70 No.230 DIPP, 18th June. Kelly to Halifax.

⁴FO 408/70 No.255 DIPP, 21st June. Kelly to Halifax.

Lord Halifax, when on 24 June he replied to the telegrams of 17 and 18 June. The Foreign Secretary described as an "illusion" the idea that the "Government might be prepared to offer to negotiate with either Hitler or Mussolini".¹ There was therefore no desire to pursue the Nuncio's proposal that Britain should "offer to negotiate". Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the above was not a reply to the possibility of eventual Vatican mediation, merely to the specific promptings of the Nuncio. This had been Britain's position throughout the war, and was in no way a new departure brought about by recent events.

On receipt of Halifax's reply, the Nuncio, while accepting the British response to his earlier enquiries as "right and inevitable", further asked whether the Government "might be willing to find out privately through third power, without committing themselves, what Herr Hitler really wanted".² Kelly's reply to this was also negative: "I repeated that we were not thinking of any compromise at all". Yet despite this Kelly urged Halifax that it would be unwise to persist in discouragements "now that the present position has been made clear" because the Vatican may be of use in detaching Italy from Germany in the future. When this message was received in London, Halifax replied that "there is no intention here of approaching Hitler to ascertain possible terms of peace" and warned further that "you will realise the danger of any language that might be capable of being twisted into any different sense".³ Therefore not only was the Government not prepared to make enquiries about negotiating a peace, they were now also not prepared to find out what Hitler's terms might be. As Churchill wrote to Halifax concerning the telegram of 29 June above, "I hope it will be made clear ... that we do not desire to make any enquiries as to terms

¹FO 408/70, 24th June, reply to Nos.225 & 230 DIPP.

²FO 408/70, No.281, 26th June. Kelly to Halifax.

³FO 371/24407 c7324/89/18, p.32, 29th June. FO to Kelly.

of peace with Hitler, and that all our agents are strictly forbidden to entertain such suggestion".¹

It would be thought that such a definite refusal would have been the end of any moves towards peace by representatives of the Vatican. This was not the case, however, as on 2 July Halifax had an interview with Archbishop Godfrey, the Apostolic Delegate, about the Pope's approaches to Berlin and Rome. These were again met with a courteous but firm refusal to pursue the suggested line.² Yet despite the Foreign Secretary's resolute position in front of the Archbishop, the same day Cadogan noted in his diary of Halifax that he was "very annoyed with him: and he's becoming slow and tired and heavy ... The Pope is making tentative half-baked suggestions for an agreement. Silly old H evidently hankering after them".³ This insight behind the public position of the Foreign Secretary adds further weight to the view that the Government was essentially a coalition of objectives, with those who looked to future victory existing alongside those who looked for future peace, and that it was partly as a consequence of this that the policy of 'wait-and-see' had been adopted.

For the moment Britain was "not prepared to ask for or show interest in Hitler's terms".⁴ Yet both Cadogan and Vansittart were "interested to know what response the Pope has met with to his approach to Berlin and Rome", the latter wondering that "we may be a little too nervous of appearing nervous, and thus depriving ourselves of some power of manoeuvre".⁵ For Churchill, who insisted against Foreign Office advice that no enquiries should be made as to German and Italian attitudes,⁶ Britain's need was to maintain an absolutely rigid attitude

¹*Ibid.*

²FO 371/24407 c7377/89/18, p.62, 2nd July & 19th July, telegram No.255 to Kelly in Berne.

³Cadogan Diaries, 2nd July. p.309.

⁴FO 371/24408 c7524/89/18, 26th July, No.1678. FO to Lothian in Washington.

⁵FO 371/24407, c7377/89/18 pp.279-283, 23rd July.

⁶*Ibid.*, p.280.

in the face of peace suggestions. The unyielding attitude of the Government was noted by von Papen, who wrote in his Memoirs that Hitler was "in a state of angry indignation" over the "rejecting, in advance, offers he had not yet made".¹ This sums up the Government's position quite accurately, but it would not necessarily always be the case, because in the Prime Minister's words to Halifax "If Hitler has anything to tell us he can easily do so".²

This last exchange of views about finding out German attitudes was prompted by Mr Kelly in Berne again asking the Foreign Office whether it "might be advantageous"³ to enquire of the Pope what German and Italian views were. In this the extent to which the Prime Minister was the prime mover behind the determined British position is shown by a comparison of the reply sent to Kelly and the note from Churchill to Halifax previously quoted, as the phrase "If Herr Hitler has anything to tell us he can easily do so" forms the main part of both.⁴

On 19 July Hitler's long-expected peace speech occurred. This has often been compared with the speech of 6 October 1939, also given in the Reichstag. Yet to make such a comparison is to both underestimate the significance of the earlier speech, and to attach more importance to the later one. In response to a Parliamentary Question in August 1940 relating to peace proposals, J.K. Roberts of the Foreign Office noted that "Germany has twice since the outbreak of war put forward so-called peace proposals".⁵ The use of the phrase "so-called peace proposals" was indeed appropriate considering that the 19 July speech "was even more nebulous" than the one of the previous October. That the July proposal was seen as "nebulous" can be shown by quotation

¹*Von Papen Memoirs*, Translated by Brian Connell. London: Andre Deutsch, 1952. p.461. Subsequently; Von Papen. Von Papen maintains that Britain "would have been well advised to take advantage of this change of mood."

²FO 371/24407, c7377/89/18, pp.279-283, 23rd July.

³FO 371/24407, c7377/89/18, p.62, 2nd and 19th July.

⁴FO 371/24407, p.40. FO to Kelly, reply to No.461 DIPP.

⁵FO 371/24407 c7542/89/18, 7th August.

from the Foreign Office translation of "Hitler's speech: Extract relating to peace" which reads as follows:

"In this hour I consider it my duty before my conscience to make one more appeal to England's common sense. I believe I am in a position to do so since I do not come begging as one defeated, but merely speak, as a victor, on behalf of commonsense. I see no reason why this fight should continue. I regret the sacrifices which it will call forth ... I know that millions of German men and lads who are glowing at the thought of at last coming to a final reckoning with that enemy who without reason declared war on us a second time ... Mr Churchill may reject my declaration with the cry that it results only from my fear and from my doubt of the ultimate issue. If so, I have, in any case, relieved my conscience in the face of coming events".¹

Reaction within the Foreign Office was summed up by F.A. Voigt of the Enemy Propaganda Department, who thought the speech "done purely for self-justification and internal consumption" and could find "no detail of a peace offer, no sign of any real interest in peace".² Sir Alec Cadogan agreed, when writing at the end of July that:

"Before Hitler spoke, it was anticipated that he might make a peace offer. After the speech, many people referred to it as "Hitler's peace offer", though for the life of me I could never detect, in any version that I read, anything (sic. that) could rightly be interpreted as an "offer" at all".³

¹FO 371/24407 c7891/89/18, p.107. Full speech pp.113 to 121. 19th July.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid*, 31st July.

History has also tended to judge Hitler's 19 July speech rather more for the anticipation it aroused than because of its content and this was generally the case at the time. The line taken by the BBC news is instructive of contemporary opinion. On the 19th the introduction to the news stated simply that "The Reichstag has heard a long speech by Hitler", whereas at midnight it was noted that the "German Chancellor said nothing new and, as usual, a great deal that was untrue". The following day the word "contempt"¹ was used to describe British reaction, all of which was very different to the treatment given the previous October.

Despite the view that Hitler had not made a peace offer, the question of the Government's reply to the remarks that had been addressed to them was actively considered. This was not that they felt a reply was strictly necessary but that, as the Cabinet minutes for 22 July record, "It would be undesirable that the occasion of Hitler's speech should be allowed to pass without any notice being taken of it".² The question then was how to respond to the occasion of the speech, rather than of the content of any reply to it. Therefore discussion centred around how the response should be given, rather than on what should be said. Cabinet opinion ranged from arranging a debate in both Houses of Parliament "expressing the resolve of this country to fight on until Nazism had been defeated", on the one hand, to the view that since "Herr Hitler's speech was intended for home consumption ..." it "did not call for any definite reply". There were none of the drawn-out discussions, consultations and draftings associated with the reply given the previous October, and it is this fact which represents the most significant distinction between the two. On 24 July the Cabinet decided not only that there should be no debate

¹BBC(WAC), 19th & 20th July. *News Transcripts*.

²Cab 65/8, WM(40)209, 22nd July.

"on questions arising out of Herr Hitler's speech",¹ mostly because there were so few questions raised by it, but also that "the Prime Minister was not preparing to make a statement ..." on it either. This fact alone shows the lack of importance attached to the occasion, as during this period Churchill was not only leading the Government, he was by far its main spokesman on all matters of importance. In October 1939 Chamberlain had deemed it necessary that he should reply to Hitler personally. The following July, however, at a time when the new Prime Minister's control over both the formation and declaration of Government war policy was far greater,² the response was left to Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary. Thus was the occasion's lack of importance symbolised. A subsidiary reason for the choice of the Foreign Secretary may also be found in a desire to prevent further rumours that Chamberlain and he were dissatisfied with the Government's policy by giving Halifax the opportunity of publicly associating himself with the refusal to talk peace. The overall view of the Government was expressed when it was decided that the press "should be discouraged from suggesting that there was anything in Herr Hitler's speech which called for an official reply from this country".³ Indeed when asked if he wished to reply to Hitler, Churchill commented "I do not propose to say anything in reply to Herr Hitler's speech, not being on speaking terms with him".⁴

The response to the fact that Hitler had raised the issue of ending the war was delivered by Lord Halifax on 22 July in a radio broadcast, not to Parliament, which is another sign of its lack of importance. The Foreign Secretary's statement was neither a detailed critique of Hitler's appeal nor a reasoned exposition of Britain's

¹*Cab 65/8, WM(40)211, 24th July.*

²*This is not, however, to say that his position was completely secure.*

³*Cab 65/8, WM(40)211, 24th July.*

⁴*Gilbert, p.672, Colville Diary, 24th July.*

position. Instead its opening sentences set out the basis for the rest of the speech: "Many of you have read two days ago the speech in which Herr Hitler summoned Great Britain to capitulate to his will. I will not waste your time by dealing with his distortions of almost every main event since the war began".¹ This almost contemptuous opening was followed by a lengthy juxtaposition of Germany's use of force as "the final rule of the destinies of men and of nations" and of Britain, who "never wanted the war", having the "noble privilege" of fighting for "truth and justice and freedom". There was very little about British policy apart from in a general sense, but what there was is of interest:

"Nor has anyone any doubt that if Hitler were to succeed it would be the end, for many besides ourselves, of all these things which, as we say, make life worth living. We realise that the struggle may cost us everything, but just because the things we are defending are worth any sacrifice, it is a noble privilege to be the defenders of things so precious. We never wanted the war; certainly no one here wants the war to go on for a day longer than is necessary. But we shall not stop fighting till freedom, for ourselves and others, is secure".

Britain was thus totally committed to a war which was "necessary" for the preservation of freedom. Therefore peace was clearly unacceptable under the conditions envisaged by Hitler. What were not made clear, however, were the future conditions which Britain would require for peace to be made other than that Germany should relinquish any claims to dominate Europe by force. The whole emphasis was in the end to be

¹FO 371/24407 c7891/89/18, p[er]f.183-7. Broadcast at 9.15 pm on 22nd July.

achieved, there was no stressing of the means for this achievement. Specifically, despite the refusal to talk with Hitler at that time, there was still no rejection of talks if they could provide the requisite guarantees of freedom.

There is more information about Halifax's views of British war aims and of the Government's attitudes towards peace negotiations in two letters from the Foreign Secretary concerning his 22 July broadcast than in the broadcast itself. The first of these was a reply to the National Peace Council on 24 July, written by Halifax's Private Secretary, which began: "He asks me to say that he fully shares your wish for a just and durable settlement, and that, if he had believed that it was at all possible to get any nearer such a settlement by asking Hitler to elaborate his peace terms, he would be very willing to do so".¹ Such a request for Hitler "to elaborate his peace terms" was broadly the thrust of Chamberlain's answer to the German Chancellor the previous October, but it had not been on this later occasion because the German Chancellor "gave no reason to suppose that he had abandoned force as a means of imposing his will upon the rest of Europe". Here again the prerequisite for peace was that Germany should abandon "force" in the resolution of conflicts. What that peace would entail was, Halifax's secretary continued "that the other nations of Europe should enjoy any right of self-determination such as has always been claimed for Germany". There was no suggestion either that Germany had to be defeated militarily first, or that there would be no peace with Hitler. Instead the security of Britain would be achieved, as it always had been, by the independence of the countries of western Europe. This impression is confirmed by a letter written by the Foreign Secretary himself the same day to the Duke of Buccleuch, where he wrote:

¹FO 371/24407 c7891/89/18, 24th July.

"We have said over and over again that we have no wish to destroy Germany and that we want a freely negotiated peace, and so on. Hitler of course also knows that Germany must retain a predominant place in Europe and therefore it is impossible to believe that he can be under any illusion as to the attitude of this country".¹

The rejection of Hitler's mooted of the idea of peace was thus not so much due to a refusal ever to negotiate, but because no "useful purpose" would be served "at this moment". Rather it would "merely sow profound discouragement in all the quarters on which we rely for our strength".² Von Papen has written in his memoirs that before 19 July Hitler had had a "change of mood", which Britain "would have been well advised to take advantage of".³ Even were this so it was not at all clear in Britain that enough of a change of heart had occurred for any credence to be given to any speech.

Hitler's speech of 19 July was rejected because it was seen as a transparent attempt by the German Chancellor to consolidate his gains and not as a genuine move towards peace. Given the pre-adoption of the policy of waiting to see how the military situation would develop during the summer, there was never any consideration of treating seriously what was mainly a piece of propaganda. As the Foreign Secretary's letters of 24 July show, however, this did not mean that the idea of peace negotiations in the future was considered unacceptable. Nor was Hitler's speech the end of so-called peace moves. On the same day the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Lothian, sent a telegram which read: "German Charge d'Affairs sent me a message that if desired he could obtain from Berlin Germany's present peace terms".⁴

¹*Halifax Papers, 24th July, to Duke of Buccleuch. A4.410.33.*

²*Ibid.*

³*Von Papen Memoirs, p.461.*

⁴*FO 371/24408 c8015/89/15, p.190, 19th July.*

While the Foreign Office were considering their reply to this, and immediately before Halifax broadcast Britain's response to Hitler, Lothian telephoned Halifax in his flat at the Dorchester Hotel. The official note of the conversation recorded that there had been "Another approach" through Lord Lothian who "could get the information as to what he means (i.e. exact peace terms) if we want it". To back up this the Ambassador added that there was "a certain amount of ... feeling" in the United States that Britain "ought to find out what Hitler means before condemning the world to 1,000,000 casualties".¹ Harold Nicolson's diary describes this conversation in more graphic terms: "Philip Lothian telephones wildly from Washington in the evening begging Halifax not to say anything in his broadcast tonight that might close the door to peace. Lothian claims that he knows the German peace terms and that they are most satisfactory".² Therefore the question of the reply to Lothian is of great interest for although eventually he was told that "we are not prepared to ask for or to show interest in Hitler's terms",³ on 20 July, after his first telegram on the subject, a substantially different draft was drawn up. Although this was not sent, it was prepared by Orme Sargent and was corrected by Halifax before the final decision was taken not to proceed. This draft contains two matters of particular interest. The first was one of the very few expositions of Britain's position in regard to any peace offer emanating from Hitler. "It is in conformity with his usual technique" Sargent wrote of Hitler "that he should in such circumstances try to undermine the morale of his enemy before his next attack. He no doubt hopes to do this by launching in this country the idea of a negotiated peace, which by creating a division of opinion in this country and indeed throughout the world might weaken the subsequent war

¹FO 371/24407, p.71, 22nd July, 7 pm.

²Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 22nd July.

³FO 371/24408 c7542/89/18, No.1678 to Washington, 26th July.

effort of HM Government and thus facilitate the attack on Great Britain which he has in contemplation".¹ This is an accurate representation of the Government's attitude towards all the peace feelers which emanated from Germany during this period. Not only were they an attempt to consolidate Germany's position, but in addition designed to produce division within Britain and rekindle the forces which had backed Appeasement. The second area of interest concerned the pre-conditions which Britain desired before thinking of peace in the future. This will be examined in detail later, although it can be noted here that the main concern was still not so much with the terms of peace, but with Hitler's underlying "conception" of the post-war European situation.

The attempt of the German Charge d'Affairs in Washington to transmit what purported to be Germany's peace terms was thus rejected,² but during the previous month there was considerable controversy in London over discussions relating to Britain's attitude towards peace between the Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, R.A. Butler, and the Swedish Ambassador, Bjorn Prytz. This conversation - of which there is no official Foreign Office record - took place on 17 June, but it was not until two days later that attention was focussed on it when the British Minister in Stockholm requested "guidance in case the [Swedish] Minister for Foreign Affairs reverts to this matter". Mallett, the British Minister, reported that Prytz had made "a statement described as a message from your Lordship [Halifax] to the effect that "common sense and not bravado would dictate His Majesty's Government's policy. This would be of interest to the Swedish Minister but could

¹FO 371/24407, pp.43-4, 20th July.

²Nicolson Diary, Typescript, 25th July. "The German Charge d'Affairs in Washington has tried through a Mr Lovell, a Quaker, to get in touch with Lothian and to offer peace terms, Lothian has now definitely been told to refuse".

not be interpreted as peace at any price".¹ The crucial fact was that Prytz believed this not just to be Butler's attitude but specifically that of Halifax as well. This was taken seriously by the Swedes, and the following day two members of the Riksdag Foreign Affairs Committee told a correspondent of the News Chronicle that "Mr Butler had said Britain would only continue the war if certain of ultimate victory".² Such a certainty was, of course, almost totally lacking at the time, as Halifax admitted when the Portugese Ambassador said he could not see how Britain would win, "I said we didn't either, but made a few suggestions which seemed to cheer him".³

Once news filtered back to London Butler denied that "the impressions given" were accurate, even Prytz apparently concurring with this at the time, and Halifax wrote to Churchill of Butler's "complete loyalty to the Government policy".⁴ Yet despite all this covering up of what was at best an indiscretion, the Prime Minister clearly believed that some "odd language" conversations had been held from which "the Swede derived a strong impression of defeatism".⁵ Whether this was merely the indiscretion of a relatively junior minister inclined to waffle, or something more serious lies in the earlier mentioned defence of Butler by the Foreign Secretary, when Halifax wrote of his junior's "complete loyalty to the Government policy".⁶ As has been shown earlier, both Halifax and Butler believed that, in the long run, "common sense and not bravado" would decide British policy once the issue of whether the island could survive intact had been determined. Therefore, despite the denials, in their eyes at least the only fault was that Prytz had made this known. A month after the Prytz incident Butler was questioned

¹FO 800/322 H/XXXII/38, 19th June. The most detailed analysis of the Prytz-Butler exchange is by Thomas Munch-Petersen in Scandia, Vol.52: 1-1986.

²FO 800/322 H/XXXII/39. From Mallett in Stockholm to FO.

³Halifax Diary, 10th July. A7.8.4.

⁴FO 800/322 H/XXXII/40, 43 & 44, 23rd, 26th & 27th June.

⁵FO 800/322 H/XXXII/42, 26th June. Churchill to Halifax.

⁶FO 800/322 H/XXXII/40,43,44, 23rd, 26th and 27th June.

by the Rumanian Minister in London "as to the type of settlement to which the British Government would agree". To this the somewhat cryptic reply given was: "that the British were a reasonable people, and no doubt there were many hopes that the time for reason would come, but certainty of some sort must precede reason, and that certainty we had not yet been able to achieve. No doubt our own efforts would shortly illustrate our power to achieve it".¹ These statements, seen by Churchill on 21 July, illustrate well the true objectives of British continuation of the war: the quest for a "certainty" or guarantee upon which to build a new European peace out of mutual reasonableness. Despite the Prime Minister's declaration in Parliament that the members of the Government "were resolved to fight on to the death",² in reality they were fighting for strategic security and European stability, the achievement of which need not have necessitated victory.

Given that the Government was determined not to negotiate but to continue the fight until the threat of invasion receded, what can be said about its longer term war or peace aims? The main features were an increased distancing from the specific terms of any settlement, and a consequent emphasis of the centrality of the "principles" for which Britain was fighting. Henry Channon captured this mood in his diary for 4 June:³ "How the atmosphere has changed from only a few weeks ago when idiotic MP's were talking academic nonsense about our restoring independence to Warsaw or Prague". Many people at the time would have been shocked to have heard a junior Foreign Office Minister describe such things as the independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia as "academic nonsense", but in the face of Britain's weakness this assessment was realistic. Yet it was not just these terms of

¹FO 371/24406 c7542/89/18, 19th July. Interview was the previous day.

²FO 800/322 H/XXXII/42, 26th June. Churchill to Halifax.

³Channon Diary, 4th June .p.256.

peace which had been down-graded, as the draft of the unsent reply to Lord Lothian's telegram about peace terms makes clear. The reason for refusing to listen to peace from Hitler was because:

"HM Government's primary concern is not so much to know what peace terms Hitler would offer to the British Empire, as to know whether his conception of a European peace is in conformity with the principles for which the British Empire is fighting".¹

Thus at least as far as the Foreign Office was concerned, the "primary concern" of British policy was not to gain the removal of Hitler (otherwise there would be no concern for "his" conception of a European peace), but to achieve German recognition of certain "principles".

The primary difficulty in the way of assessing the principles for which Britain was fighting is that given the situation where such a slender chance existed of negotiations taking place, statements on the subject tended to be both scarce and vague.² Yet despite this handicap certain strands can be seen. In the reply that was put to Lothian's enquiries, which although similar in substance is considerably less forthcoming than the unsent draft, it was the lack "of any compatibility between their aims and ours"³ which was the obstacle to peace. Yet care is needed before assuming that this was because Britain's aim was merely "to win the war and destroy Hitlerism"⁴ as Churchill was wont to claim (particularly when, as in this example, trying to revive lagging spirits). A more realistic statement of the

¹ FO 371/24407, pp.43-4, 20th July.

² There was also the problem of discussions being "detrimental to National Defence at a most grave moment". Churchill to R. Stokes, 23rd July, Dep Stokes Box 1.

³ FO 371/24408, c7542/89/18. No.1678 to Washington, 26th July.

⁴ Gilbert, p.530, 13th June. Churchill to Reynaud at Supreme War Council.

position can be found in an aide memoire given by Halifax to the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Godfrey, on 2 July. This note, of which the "Prime Minister approved", held that the difference of "aim" referred to earlier was that while the British "have no wish to destroy Germany ... [they] are determined not to see Europe and ourselves under Nazi domination and shall be prepared to fight to the end against it".¹ Thus it was the strategic threat of "Nazi domination" of Europe which was still the prime reason for continuing to fight. War was not to destroy Germany, but to prevent her being in a position to destroy Britain. There were in fact repeated denials through this period of any intention to crush or dismember the German state. The above aide memoire for the Pope said so, as did the previously mentioned telegram of 26 July to Lothian, stating "... it is not our intention to deny Germany her rightful position in Europe".² The previous day, when asked in the House of Commons whether Britain would "seek to deny to the German people their own freedom within the framework of a secure European order",³ Attlee replied that this was not the case, as "our aim is to see Europe as a free association of independent states". Although there was an element of propaganda in these statements, particularly as regards those which might reach American ears, their general truth stands.

The "principles" behind Britain's continuation of the war may be summarised briefly. There was a refusal to acquiesce to German hegemony over Europe, and a consequent refusal to "desert the cause of Allies whose independence had been temporarily destroyed".⁴ Given that neither of these necessitated the destruction of Germany, how did these "principles" affect the possibility of a termination of

¹FO 371/24406 7377/89/18, 2nd July. This was repeated virtually word for word on 19th July in a report of Godfrey's visit to Mr Kelly, the Minister in Berne. FO 371/24407, No.255.

²FO 371/24408, c7542/89/18. No.1678 to Washington, 26th July.

³Hansard, Vol.363, Column 977, 25th July.

⁴FO 371/24406, c7377/89/18, 2nd July.

hostilities short of victory - or defeat? Britain was not fighting to prevent a loss of face but for her very survival, therefore although an agreement to sign a peace with Hitler would have involved the eating of a good many words, it should not be - and was not - considered as impossible on those grounds alone. The Government was fighting "to assert ... principles"¹ and would continue to "prosecute the war with the utmost vigour by all means that are open to us until the righteous purposes for which we entered upon it have been fulfilled".² That much was beyond doubt, that Britain was now engaged in a total war, but what if the "righteous purposes" could be achieved by negotiations, even with Hitler? This is a question which, although never forced upon Churchill's Government, was one that had to be considered. Again, given the extremely serious nature of any material which might have implied that Britain would consider terms with Hitler, it is not surprising that little evidence remains. Yet as David Reynolds has written, "... the hope was still that, by fighting on, Britain could secure acceptable terms".³ On 6 June, when recording a discussion between himself and Churchill on the subject of whether Lloyd George should be invited to join the Cabinet, Halifax wrote that the Prime Minister "meant to put him [Lloyd George] through an inquisition first as to whether he had the root of the matter in him". This central issue was not whether he accepted the necessary defeat of Germany, or the overthrow of Hitler, as the essential precondition to peace, but "that any Peace terms now, or hereafter, offered must not be destructive of our independence".⁴ This was then the bottom line of the Government's war and peace aims. Were they able to secure Britain's independence - which in any but the most dire of situations

¹FO 371/24408, c7542/89/18. No.1678 to Washington, 26th July.

²Gilbert, p.642. Churchill in House of Commons, 4th July.

³Reynolds, p.105.

⁴Halifax Diary, 6th June. A7.8.4.

also included the removal of German control from western Europe - then such a peace would not be unacceptable if it truly was secure.

One of the central questions in any discussion of Britain's position in regard to peace negotiations is whether, as was publicly stated, no agreement of any sort would have been reached with Hitler. On 6 July, Anthony Eden was reported by the BBC as saying of negotiations with Hitler: "We are not in any circumstances prepared to negotiate with him at any time on any subject".¹ Churchill had propounded this line earlier when he wrote to the Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, that "I shall myself never enter into any peace negotiations with Hitler ...", although he followed this by warning that "a kind of Quisling affair" may accept terms if Britain were beaten.² This has led Paul Addison to speculate that "while he [Churchill] would never have agreed" to peace with Hitler, "he recognised that others might negotiate an untreasonable peace".³ Although there is insufficient evidence to contradict this conclusion about the Prime Minister's attitude, the statement of Anthony Eden certainly does need modification. It was one thing to assert that Britain would not "in any circumstances" conclude a peace with Hitler, but in the drastic situation then facing the country to have based policy on that assertion would have exhibited gross myopia. In fact there was the realisation that peace might have to be negotiated with Hitler, a conclusion implicit in the wait-and-see policy adopted. As noted earlier in the unsent draft reply to Lord Lothian of 20 July, the reason given - and approved by the Foreign Secretary - for not accepting Hitler's peace feelers was that: "HM Government's primary concern is not so much to know what peace terms Hitler would offer to the British Empire, as to know whether his (underlining mine) conception of a

¹BBC(WAC), 6th July. *News Transcripts*.

²Prem 4/43B/1, 24th June. *Churchill to Mackenzie King*.

³Reynolds, p.105, Note 51.

European peace is in conformity with the principles for which the British Empire is fighting".¹ Hitler's "conception" of peace could only be of any significance if it was realised that he might be a signatory at a future peace conference. That this was a possibility, however remote or unpleasant, was recognised as late as December 1940 when Churchill was asked in the House of Commons to "make it clear to the world that in no circumstances can there ever be any negotiation with Herr Hitler" and, in the words of J.K. Roberts of the Foreign Office, to "put a similar ban on Herr Hitler to that which was put upon Napoleon after his escape from Elba".² It might be expected that this request would have been readily acceded to, yet this was not the case. Roberts continued after the above comment to write that: "I do not think we can in terms commit ourselves to never undertaking negotiations in any circumstances with Herr Hitler ..."; instead he desired a reply "in general terms" which expressed "our intention to get rid of Herr Hitler and the Nazi system ...". R. Mackins described the question "as rather silly", and in the end Churchill replied that: "These admirable sentiments so happily expressed do not at this moment require to be embodied in a formal State declaration". Although the undoubted intention of Government was that Hitler should be removed from office before peace was concluded, it was unnecessary to say so formally because there was no prospect of peace at that time. Nevertheless it was also unwise to make such a declaration as there was no telling whether Britain's best interests would, at some time in the future, be served by an agreement of sorts with the present German Government.

Churchill's Government was prepared to fight "until the righteous purposes" of the war had "been fulfilled", but they also recognised that such a fulfilment might occur short of victory. Indeed not to have concluded thus would have been both unrealistic and irresponsible.

¹FO 371/24407, 20th July, pp.43-4.

²FO 371/24362, 19th December 1940, pp.245-248.

Conclusion

The object of this thesis has been to explore the motives, features and development of the British Government's war aims during the first ten months of the Second World War, and to examine the impact these had upon their responses to attempts at an early peace between the two sides. From this study it is possible to deduce a number of important conclusions.

The Government was not in principle opposed to the idea of an early peace with Germany. This was true of both Chamberlain and Churchill, who could write on 9 October that he did "not close the door upon any genuine offer".¹ Yet although they would listen to any peace proposal, they were in no way prepared to initiate movement in this direction: Hitler would have to make the first move and offer realistic terms. The way the Government hoped to achieve its objectives was to obtain a peace which was guaranteed by tangible German concessions. There would be no more Munichs, but there was equally no desire for total military victory. In October the Government's position was summarised as follows:

"No reliance on assurances of present German Government, reparation of wrongs to Czechs and Poles, full and convincing guarantees, no desire for vindictive peace, up to German Government to make proposals and give concrete evidence of its pacific intentions".²

¹ Prem 1/395, 5th Oct. Covering note to Churchill's draft reply to Hitler's 6th Oct. 1939 Speech.

² FO 800/310, 20th Oct. 1939. Telegram to Lord Lothian, "for your personal and confidential information", which was seen and initialled by both Halifax and Cadogan.

Four months later, the Government's position had not fundamentally changed as Chamberlain announced that "we for our part should be ready to seek a settlement with any Government that had subscribed to these aims and given proof - proof that can be relied upon - of their security." It was this desire for guarantees, rather than any of the various territorial adjustments necessary in Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, which was seen as the essential precondition for peace negotiations. But these guarantees were not confined to strategic or military measures, although a general disarmament would be one of the elements involved. What was required was a German abandonment of aggression as an instrument of policy brought about by the rejection of "the thesis that might is right".² It was as evidence of this change of policy that some restitution of parts of Poland and Czechoslovakia would be required. This view seems now to be rather remote from the military realities which prevailed, and similar criticism can be levelled at much of the British Government's thinking about war aims.

Central to the question of the necessary guarantees for peace was that of whether Hitler could be a signatory to that peace. This depended upon the Government's view of whether an agreement could be reached which Hitler would keep, not merely because he had signed it but because it showed a deeper, fundamental realisation that aggression had failed and would always fail. On occasion Chamberlain and Halifax commented that the only way forward was Hitler's removal, yet more frequently they appeared to contemplate a settlement to which Hitler was party. Thus the telegram to Dominion Prime Ministers outlining the Government's reply to Hitler's 6 October speech read:

¹ *The Times*, 26th Feb. Report of Chamberlain's speech in Birmingham on 24th Feb.

² *Ibid.*

"If ... the German Government have not yet closed their minds to the possibility of negotiation, Herr Hitler may be expected to reply to our statement."

"In other words, if Herr Hitler wants to negotiate we have given him the chance to do so."

Any negotiation with Hitler would have been difficult in the extreme and would have involved the giving up of a considerable amount - if not all - of the German gains in Poland and Czechoslovakia. But by such a process the British Government felt that they would have forced a recognition of the fact that war was not worth it. It would also be a defeat of the aggressive Nazi policy of the previous few years.

These central themes predominated for the duration of the "phoney war", but they were supplemented by a number of other points of interest. Among these is the question of whether the war was really against Nazism or against Germany itself. Linked with this was the debate on how to accommodate the admitted differences between the French and British Governments over aims and tactics. Discussion of war aims tended to be associated with particular events, for example Hitler's peace offer of 6 October, the Dutch-Belgian mediation approach of November, the covert activities culminating in the Venlo incident and the tour of inquiry by Sumner Welles, US Under-Secretary of State. Conversely, during times of greater military activity such as the Finland crisis and then the invasions of Denmark and Norway, questions of war aims became submerged beneath the day to day events.

¹ Cab 21/952, 12th Oct. Text of telegram to Dominions. (Underlining mine.)

Once the Germans attacked on the Western Front in May 1940 there was a change in the way war aims were considered, as well as in the Government considering them. At first the activity of fighting made all such questions irrelevant. Once reversal became a rout, however, it imposed the questions of continuation of the war and of acceptable peace terms with a hitherto unknown urgency.

As the British forces retreated to Dunkirk and it became clear that the French intended to surrender, Churchill's Government had to face the question of whether to look for or accept the offer of peace which it felt was bound to follow. The person who forced this issue was the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. It is because he was convinced that there was a case for considering peace that the other Cabinet members put forward their arguments as to why this was not the course to follow. In Halifax's view, they should be prepared to consider terms which "would not affect our independence", because:

"we must not ignore the fact that we might get better terms before France went out of the war and our aircraft factories were bombed, than we might get in three months time".¹

Thus, at a time of great military and indeed political weakness, it was the views of the Foreign Secretary which ensured that the Cabinet discussions turned to the broad question of whether Britain should continue the war. Had this line of thinking been pursued, then Britain would have sought peace, possibly via Italian mediation. Yet Churchill

¹ *Cab 65/13, WM(40)144, 28th May.*

was adamant that "the only safe way was to convince Hitler that he couldn't beat us"¹ and, with the acquiescence of Chamberlain and with the support of Attlee, Greenwood and the non-War Cabinet Ministers he was able to pursue his policy. Rather than carry out his threat to resign, Halifax allowed Churchill to go ahead and fight his battle.

The Prime Minister's view was central to what Britain was trying to achieve from June 1940; but two points of clarification must be made. First, Churchill did not reject all idea of peace. As he said on 27 May, "If Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the terms of the restoration of German colonies and the overlordship of Central Europe, that was one thing. But it was quite unlikely that he would make such an offer", adding later that "he would not join France in asking for terms, but if he were told what the terms offered were, he would be prepared to consider them."² Second, the decision not to look for peace in May - July 1940 did not mean that it would not be considered later, once Britain had proved she could not be invaded or bombed into submission.

The policy adopted by Churchill and his Government following the above discussions, was that long-term questions should be avoided while the issue of whether Britain could survive or not was fought out. What would follow once the answer to this question became clear was another matter; for the next few months it was necessary to wait and see what happened.

But what were the factors which were critical to this 'wait and see' policy? Again, it is helpful to highlight two issues which were not the most essential. Firstly, the battle in France and evacuation of

¹ *Chamberlain Diary*, 26th May. NC2/24a.

² *Cab 65/13*, WM(40)142, 27th May.

Dunkirk were not to be the central plank of the wait and see policy. Although the successful evacuation was a tremendous boost, the decision to continue had been made beforehand, when it was fully expected that only 30-40,000 men would be rescued. To a large extent the policy to be pursued was decided despite the forecast of defeat at Dunkirk; the unexpected success acted as a stimulus and an encouragement but it was not central to the decisions about the war in general taken in late May. Secondly, the support of the USA could not critically affect those areas seen as most crucial in the early summer of 1940. American assistance was necessary if victory was to be the end result of the war, but when the Chiefs of Staff assessed Britain's chances of survival against invasion, no mention was made of assistance from across the Atlantic. Support from the United States was important for a continuation of the war beyond the autumn of 1940, and for sustaining British morale in the meantime. Although Churchill frequently used hopes of US involvement to bolster the courage of his colleagues, the available evidence does not show that he depended on her assistance to help Britain through the immediate crisis.

The factor of central and overriding importance to the success of the wait and see policy was the ability of Fighter Command to ward off and defeat the Luftwaffe's bid to win control of the skies over South East England. Lord Halifax said that "The Prime Minister had said that two or three months would show whether we were able to stand up against the air risk", or again "that the future of this country hinged on whether the enemy's bombs happened to hit our aircraft factories."¹ To a large extent this was accurate. The Chiefs of Staff were in general

¹ Cab 65/13, WM(40)142, 27th May.

agreement. Even before the successful evacuation of the bulk of the BEF from Dunkirk they were confident that:

"While our air force is in being, our navy and air force together should be able to prevent Germany carrying out a serious seaborne invasion of this country."¹

The centrality of the RAF for the military fate of Britain has been clearly recognised. What has not so far been fully appreciated is its importance for the whole of the Government's policy towards Germany and the war, with its policy becoming virtually a question of waiting to see if the RAF could survive.

Once it had been decided to wait upon events, particularly those in the skies above Britain, the Government again had to decide how best to respond to peace feelers. This culminated in Lord Halifax's contemptuous rejection of the approach made by Hitler in early July.

In summary this thesis has five main conclusions. Firstly, after the outbreak of war, Chamberlain's Government saw an early peace as a possibility, albeit a distant one. The likelihood of Hitler offering reasonable terms was remote indeed, but had he agreed to withdraw from Poland then negotiations for a wide ranging peace treaty could have commenced. Furthermore, Winston Churchill realised that to contemplate a settlement by the above means was not dishonourable. Secondly, whether peace came early or only following a lengthy war, the key elements were that it should have been shown conclusively that aggression had failed

¹ Cab 66/7, WP(40)169, 26th May.

and that any treaty should be backed by effective guarantees. Of these guarantees the best was that Hitler would be removed from power, but it was not always thought that his remaining in office automatically made peace impossible. Thirdly, war aims tended to be defined as and when peace approaches were received or anticipated. Chamberlain was concerned that the process of defining war aims should not trap the Government into getting itself tied to specific commitments when they had no idea of the circumstances which would prevail when peace came to be discussed.

Fourthly, the discussions and arguments within the Cabinet over the future of the war following France's collapse were the closest Britain ever came to seeking peace with Germany. The reason peace was not sought was that Churchill, backed by Attlee and Greenwood, thought that the RAF would be able to overcome the threat of the Luftwaffe, thus making invasion or subjugation by bombing much less likely. Lord Halifax, who had argued vigorously for the course of peace to be tried, was in the end prepared to let Churchill fight his battle and to 'wait and see' what transpired. Chamberlain's support for the new Prime Minister, though rather more from loyalty than from conviction, was a vital element in the decision to fight on. Finally, it was the fate of the RAF that everything else hinged upon. There had been no decision to fight on regardless, in the expectation of American assistance, whatever Churchill's speeches may have said. Rather there had been agreement to 'wait and see' what transpired in the air over South East England that summer - only once this was clear could long term questions about war or peace be decided.

APPENDIX I

Reuter's Text of final portion of Hitler's speech of 6th October 1939

"What otherwise, then, could be the reason for war? Has Germany made any demands to England which threaten the British Empire in any way or have placed its existence in danger?

"No; but if this war is really to be waged in order to give Germany a new regime, to smash the present rule and create a new Versailles, then millions of human beings will be sacrificed again; for neither will the German Reich break to pieces nor will a second Versailles emerge.

"But even if after a war lasting three or four or even eight years this should be possible, then a second Versailles would be a source of new conflicts in the future.

"No, this war in the West will not settle any problems at all except perhaps the finances of certain international war profiteers.

"Two questions are today at issue:-

(1) The regulation of the problems arising from the dismemberment of Poland; and

(2) The problem of dealing with those international anxieties which make the political and economic life of nations so difficult.

"What are the aims of the German Government with regard to the regulation of the conditions in the space west of the German-Russian line of demarcation, which has been recognised as a sphere of German interests?

"They are:-

(1) To create a Reich frontier which, as has already been emphasised, corresponds to the historical, ethnographic and economic realities.

(2) To regulate the whole living space according to nationalities; that means a solution of those nationality problems which do not always affect this space alone, but extend into practically all countries in South-Eastern Europe.

(3) In this connection to try to solve the Jewish problem.

(4) To reconstruct economic life and traffic to the benefit of all those living in that space.

(5) To guarantee the security of that empire space; and

(6) To establish a new Polish state which by its structure and leadership will give a guarantee that neither a new centre of conflict directed against Germany will come into being nor that a focus of intrigues will be created against Germany and Russia.

In addition, we must try to remove the immediate consequences arising from the war, or at least to mitigate them.--

"These tasks can be discussed at a conference - as has already been emphasised - but they can never be solved there.

"If Europe wants calm and peace then the European states ought to be grateful that Germany and Russia are prepared to transform this area of disturbance into a zone of peaceful development. For the German Government such a task will mean that Germany will have her hands full for the coming 50 years.

"The second task, which I believe is by far the most important, should lead to the establishment not only of the feeling but also the certainty of European security. For this it is necessary that:-

(1) There should be absolute clarity with regard to the aims of the

European states in the sphere of foreign policy.

"As far as Germany is concerned, it can be stated that the Reich Government is prepared to make its aims in the sphere of foreign policy perfectly clear without any reservations. First of all, we want to say that we consider the Versailles Treaty extinct, and that the German Government and with it the entire German nation see no reason and no cause for any further revision except for the demand for such colonial possessions as are due to the Reich and correspond to it.

"This means, in the first place the restoration of the German colonies. This request, let it be noted, is not dressed up in the form of an ultimatum backed by force. It is simply a claim in political justice and economic reason.

(2) To facilitate the exchange of productions it is necessary to attain a new ordering of markets and a definitive regulation of currencies, thus removing step by step the obstacles to free trade.

(3) The most important condition for the real prosperity of European and extra-European economies is the creation of an absolutely guaranteed peace and a feeling of security among all the peoples.

"This requires not only a final sanctioning of the status of Europe but also the reduction of armaments to a reasonable and economically tolerable extent.

"It is also necessary to define clearly the applicability and the use of certain modern weapons capable of striking at any time into the heart of any nation and so causing a lasting feeling of insecurity. In my previous Reichstag speeches I have already made proposals in this direction. They were rejected.

"I believe, however, that the feeling of national security will not return to Europe before, by clear and valid international obligations, a clear definition of what is permitted and what not in the use of these weapons is given.

"It must be possible to define the use of gas, of submarines, and also the nature of contraband, in such a manner that the war will be deprived of its terrible character of a fight against women and children and non-combatants in general.

"It must be possible in connection with the Red Cross to reach a fundamentally valid international agreement.

"Only under such conditions can peace return to our thickly populated continent, which freed from distrust and anxiety can provide the necessary conditions for real prosperity in economic life.

"I do not believe there is a single responsible European statesman who does not desire at the bottom of his heart to see the prosperity of his people, the realisation of this wish is only possible in the framework of the general collaboration of the nations of this continent. The safeguarding of such collaboration must be the aim of every man who is really struggling for the benefit of his people.

"To attain this aim one day the great nations of this continent must come together and hammer out and guarantee a comprehensive agreement which will give to all a feeling of security and quiet and peace.

"It is impossible for such a conference to meet without fundamental preparations to clear up isolated points. It is equally impossible for a conference which must settle the fate of this continent for centuries to work amid the roar of guns or under the pressure of mobilised armies.

"If, however, sooner or later these problems must be settled, then it would be more reasonable to proceed with that settlement before millions of people lose their lives for no purpose and milliards worth of property are destroyed.

"The maintenance of the present position in the West is unthinkable.

Every day claims more victims. One day perhaps France will begin to bombard and destroy Saarbruecken, and the German artillery on its side will retaliate by laying Mulhausen in ruins. Then France will put Karlsruhe under the threat of gunfire, and Germany will do the same with Strasbourg. After that the French artillery will bombard Freiburg and the German artillery Kolmar or Schlettstadt.

"Long range guns will then be placed in position, and on both sides the destruction will spread still deeper. And whatever the long range guns cannot reach the airmen will destroy and it will be very interesting for certain international journalists and very profitable for the manufacturers of aeroplanes, arms and munitions, but frightful for the victims.

"This war of destruction will not be limited to the continent. It will extend far overseas. There are no longer any islands. The property of the European peoples will be blown up by shells. The strength of the people will bleed on the battlefield. Then one day there will again be a frontier between France and Germany. But instead of flourishing cities there will be ruins and endless cemeteries.

"It is probable that these remarks of mine will be regarded by Churchill and his friends merely as weakness or cowardice. I need not trouble myself with their opinion. I only make this declaration because I very naturally desire to spare my people sufferings. But should the views of Messrs Churchill and his following prevail, then this declaration will be my last, we should then fight.

"Neither force of arms nor time will overcome Germany; 1918 will never be repeated in German history. The hope that our people will be destroyed is childish. Mr Churchill may be convinced that Great Britain will win, but I do not hesitate for a second to say that Germany will win. Fate will decide who is right. Only one thing is certain. In the history of the world there have never been two victors, although often there have been two vanquished. This seems to me to have been the case in the last war.

"Let us hope that the people and their leaders who are of the same opinion will say the word of peace. Let those repulse my hand who regard war as the better solution. As leader of the German people and Chancellor of the Reich, I can only thank God at this moment that he has so marvellously and wonderfully blessed us in our first hard struggle for our right and pray to him that he will guide us and all others on the right path along which not only the German people, but the whole of Europe will find a new happiness and peace."

APPENDIX IIForeign Office translation of "Hitler's Speech: Extract
relating to peace". 19th July 1940

In this hour I consider it my duty before my conscience to make one more appeal to England's common sense. I believe I am in a position to do so since I do not come begging as one defeated, but merely speak, as a victor, on behalf of common sense. I see no reason why this fight should continue. I regret the sacrifices which it will call forth ... I know that millions of German men and lads who are glowing at the thought of at last coming to a final reckoning with that enemy who without reason declared war on us a second time ... Mr Churchill may reject my declaration with the cry that it results only from my fear and from my doubt of the ultimate issue. If so, I have, in any case, relieved my conscience in the face of coming events.

FO 371/24407 c7891/81/18

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